Love Stories of the Real West

RANCH ROMANCES

15c

Hawk of the Mesa

By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

Second October Number

I'M THROUGH FOOLING AROUND WITH AN infectious condition!

1 WHAT TO TRY NEXT? That dandruff was so unbelievably stubborn! I was sure upset—suppose this was the infectious kind! When my wife suggested Listerine, I said, "First, I'll ask Doctor Joe!"

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BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT. RADIO'S STILL A YOUNG GROWING FIELD
TOM'S RIGHT. AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOOD PAY
TRAINING AT HOME FOR RADIO IS PRACTICAL AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST
SOON I CAN START FIXING RADIOS
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RANCH ROMANCES

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No. 3

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

SECOND OCTOBER NUMBER

CONTENTS

HAWK OF THE MESA.....William Freeman Hough 4
A Complete Novel

ORPHAN OF THE DESERT.....Eric Howard 48

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR.....Austin Corcoran 58

TAMING OF THE SHREWD.....Cliff Walters 68
A Novelette

ONE TRAIL FOR TWO.....Clee Woods 88

THE GYP BONANZA.....George Armin Shaftel 96

JACK BICKERDYKE, INDIAN FIGHTER.....Frank Collinson 106
An Old-Timer Reminisces

COWBOY LORE.....Walt Mead 112
Leaves From a Cowboy's Sketch Book

TEXAS FIRE-EATER.....Robert Dale Denver 114
A Spirited Serial Romance—Part Two

OUT OF THE CHUTES.....Tex Sherman 134
The Rodeo Department

RANCH ROMANCES' AMATEUR PAGE.....The Readers 136

OUR AIR MAIL.....The Readers 138
The Pen Pals' Pages

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE..... 141

TRAIL'S END ROLL CALL..... 142
The Club Page

WHOM SHALL I MARRY.....Professor Marcus Mari 143
The Horoscope Department

In the Third October Number

GOOD HOPE GULCH

A Novel of Two Fighting Hearts

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

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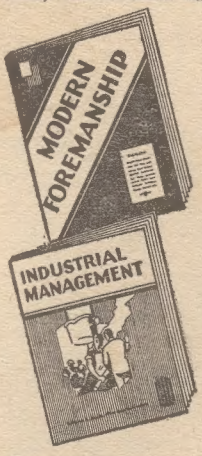

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Hawk of the Mesa

Each bush, each clump of trees might hide an ambusher when Barney Bogard rode the range, for he was a lawman with the sharp eyes of a hawk and the tenacity of a bulldog, and no crook dared face him in the open. He could be gentle, though, and tender, with the woman he loved.

CHAPTER I

Green Pasture

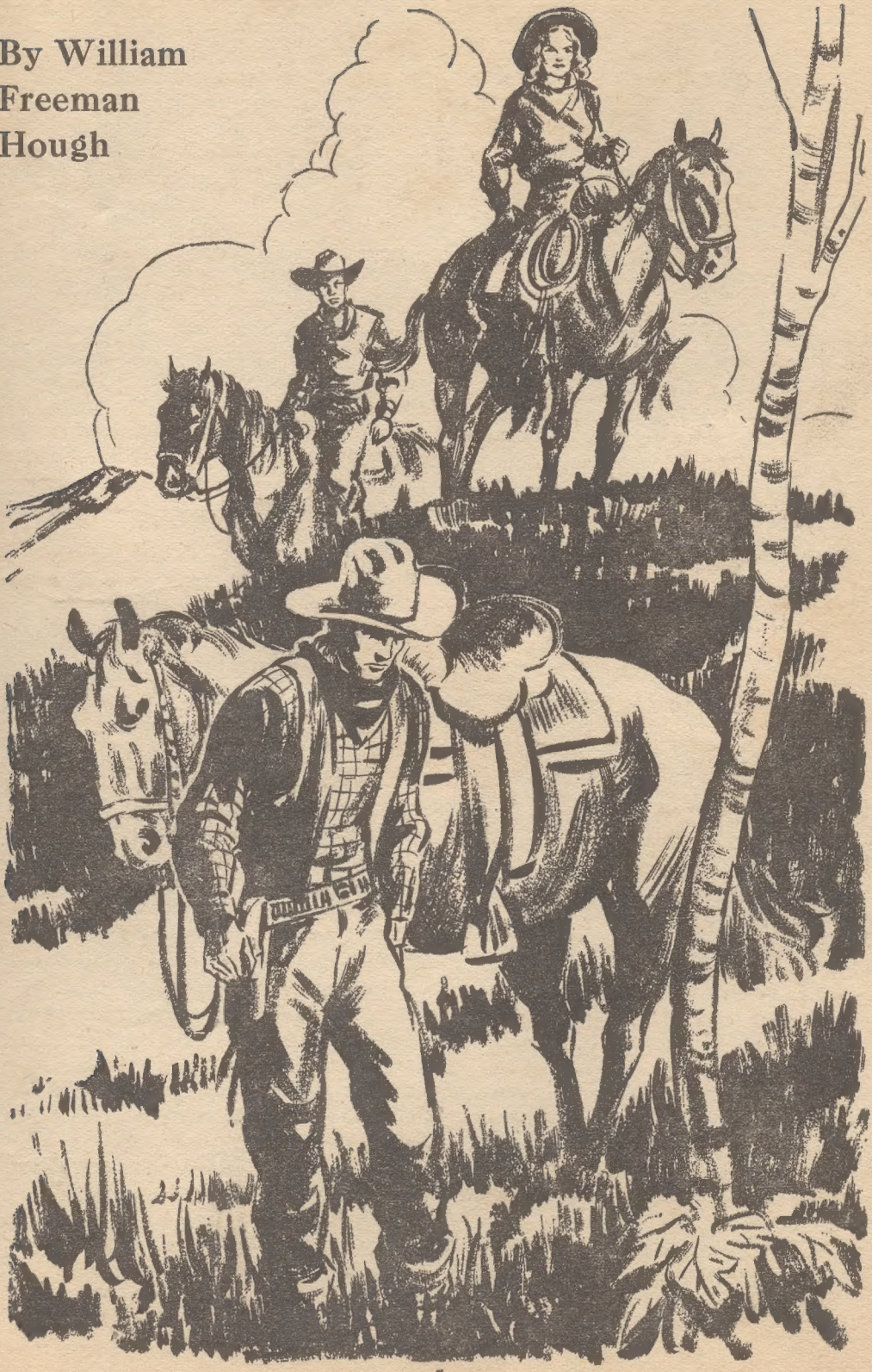
STANDING at the outer fringe of the crowd which surrounded the courthouse steps, Barney Bogard saw the election official appear and wave a paper for silence. The murmur of voices died away, and in the following silence the announcement came. A new sheriff had been elected. Barney swallowed stiffly, resentfully. He heard a few triumphant shouts, some expressions of regret. Then the new sheriff appeared on the steps and waved his hands. Some of the crowd remained to hear his brief speech; others turned away. Barney just stood there, stunned.

From the shadows of the street a woman appeared, mounted the steps and shook hands with the new sheriff. She was a striking woman, with a wealth of golden hair falling about her shoulders. As the light from the doorway fell across her features Barney saw that her eyes were wide-set above high cheek bones. She had large, square shoulders in keeping with her height, which was close to five feet seven inches. In that brief observation Barney had a vague notion that he had seen her before. Then she returned to the street and disappeared.

Barney walked slowly toward the sheriff's office. It was going to be hard to tell Little John that for the first time in twelve years he had been defeated. Little John Cope was an institution in the county; a seeming fixture, until tonight. Now he was all through, and Barney was afraid the blow would be very severe.

In spite of his stooped shoulders Little John Cope stood six feet four behind his scarred desk. There was no fade in the keen eyes that watched his deputy come slowly through the door

By William Freeman Hough



and halt before him. There was no regret in those eyes as he nodded to Barney and produced a smile. His shaggy gray head bobbed up and down.

"I know, Barney," he said. "I'm whipped at last. I can tell by the look of you."

"The fools!" exploded Deputy Sheriff Barney Bogard. "The idiots! Didn't know when they were well off."

"Youth claims its place, son, and I'm getting old. It's all right; I don't mind a little bit."

Barney went forward to lay a hand on the old man's arm. "I'm sorry, John, sorry as hell."

"You needn't be, Barney. It's time I went to the green pasture, like all old horses."

Barney knew that all old horses never reached the green pasture. He knew that Little John had no green pasture, for the man who had been sheriff all those years had also been too generous; he had saved nothing.

Little John Cope slipped an arm around his deputy's shoulder. "Promise me you won't let this make you bitter, Barney. You're like a son to me, and I'd hate to let this reverse set you back. You've the making of a mighty fine officer in you and you must go on."

Outside in the street some exuberant fellow let go with his gun, the shots coming fast on the heels of a series of shouts. Barney jerked away and headed for the door, but Little John called him back. "Let 'em have their fun, Barney. No harm in it. It just proves that I wasn't so danged popular after all."

"What are you going to do, John?" asked Barney.

"Do? Well—" The old sheriff's eyes went past Barney to the doorway, remained there as he murmured, "I think the answer to that is here."

Barney whirled about to face the tall, golden-haired woman he had seen on the court house steps shaking hands with the newly elected sheriff. She stood there erect and with a triumphant smile on her wide lips. There was a gleam in her wide-set amber eyes and her whole person radiated vitality.

"Hello, honey," said Little John Cope and held out both arms.

The exceedingly handsome woman came to him quickly, lay against his broad chest and let his arms hold her closely. Little John brushed his chin through the thick golden tresses.

"At last," she cried. "At last I've got you, you old terror."

"Wait a minute!" snapped Barney. "I saw this woman shaking hands with Torkum not fifteen minutes ago."

Little John nodded. "I suppose you did, son. I've sort of suspected he had some outside support, some money for the campaign. Pauline has been trying to pry me out of this job for the last four years."

"And I've managed it at last! Now you'll come, John?"

Little John Cope shrugged. "What else can I do? Where else could I go?"

"I'm glad, so glad and happy. I need you, Little John."

This was all over Barney Bogard's head. He stood there puzzled and half angry, until Little John released the woman and stepped back.

"Excuse me, Barney. Let me introduce Pauline Pringle. Do you recall 'The Perils of Pauline' in the old silent movie days? Well, this is the heroine of all those pictures. I was always the sheriff in those pictures, and we had a grand time of it, eh, Pauline?"

"Those were wonderful days, Little John. You were a marvelous actor and a great sheriff."

"And a reckless spender, too. Pauline was smart, Barney. She saved her money and bought a big ranch up in the north part of the state. She's been after me for years to come up there and stay—a sort of green pasture, son."

"And now you are coming," said the handsome actress of the old days.

Barney understood it now and offered his hand to Pauline Pringle. Looking into those amber eyes, he saw in their depths something more than her present triumph; he saw a genuine

love for her old friend, Little John Cope who, Barney suspected, had had much to do with her success in the pictures.

"I'm mighty proud to make your acquaintance, ma'am" he said. "It'll make me feel a heap better to know that Little John has a real green pasture. I reckon I can forgive you any help you gave Torkum in this campaign."

"I just got here tonight, in time to learn the results."

"Did you bring Teresa with you?" asked Little John.

"Oh, yes, John. She's been anxious to see you again. But you'd never recognize her now. She's grown up." There was a shade of anxiety in Pauline Pringle's voice. Anxiety and regret. "Eighteen now, and beautiful, John."

BARNEY BOGARD

"She couldn't be anything else but beautiful, honey. Where is she?"

"I left her in a store down the street, but she said she'd be along in a moment or two. You know how a new town attracts a young girl."

As she finished speaking there were voices on the walk outside the sheriff's office. A girl uttered a quick protest and was answered by a thick-voiced man. Then the girl's voice:

"Keep away from me! Keep away, or I'll—"

"Teresa!" cried Pauline Pringle. "Some man—"

Barney Bogard would have bet his life that fear had never filled those amber eyes, but it was there now. He leaped for the door, reached the walk in time to see a man struggling with a girl. He caught that man by the shoulder, spun him around and struck him squarely on the chin with a tight fist. The man staggered back into the arms of Little John Cope who, without checking the motion, lifted him head high and hurled him out into the dust of the street. Pauline Pringle had caught the girl's arm and drawn her inside the office door.

"Look out, John!" cried Barney, dipping to his knees. As he did so fire spurted in the street and a bullet smacked into the door-frame. Barney, as he slid forward to his stomach, whipped out his gun and pressed the trigger. The man in the street bellowed in pain, got to his feet and began running a zig-zag course toward the far side. He was holding an arm in front of him; his gun lay where he had dropped it.

Barney stood up, holstered his gun and brushed the dust from his clothing. It was rather a disgusting experience and it never occurred to him that he had made a difficult shot seem easy. The light had been poor and the target small. But there was one drunk in town that night who would forever bear the mark of Barney Bogard.

Pauline Pringle's eyes were mere tawny slits when Barney and Little John came back into the office. The woman had her arm about the girl as some wild animal might protect its young. Barney observed them soberly for a minute; then something warm began to flow down his spine and fill him with strange vibrations.

Teresa Pringle was not handsome like her mother. She was beautiful. She had the same golden hair but her eyes were blue. Nor were her cheek

bones so prominent as those of the larger woman. Her face was a delicate oval with a chin that just hinted at being square.

"Thank you, Uncle John," she said. I'm sorry I caused trouble."

"Don't thank me, Teresa child; thank Barney here. He's the lad for quick action."

Teresa Pringle shifted her glance to Barney and the corners of her lips lifted in a faint smile. "Thank you," she murmured.

Barney swallowed stiffly and nodded. Little John said, "Got a kiss for me, child?" He took her in his arms as he had her mother and, for the first time in his life, Barney Bogard envied Little John Cope.

"We're getting out of this town at once," said Pauline Pringle crisply. "How long will it take you to get ready, John?"

"About half an hour. You can come to the hotel with me while I pack up my things." He turned to Barney and held out a grizzled paw. "You stay on until the new sheriff takes over. Do it for me, eh?"

"Sure, John. And good luck to you in green pastures."

Their hands were tightly clasped and John Cope's voice was husky as he said, "Son, I want you to make good. You've got it in you, I know. It may not be here but it'll be some place. Let me hear from you sometime." Then quickly, to hide further emotion, he herded the two women from the office and down the street.

Barney sat down in the old chair behind the desk and stared into the outer darkness. How swiftly things could change! Little John defeated and already on the way to a big ranch up north. Pauline Pringle, once a great star of Western pictures. And Teresa! No matter where he looked during the next hour Barney saw her face. He saw her sheltered in the arm of her mother, a mother who gazed from the eyes of a tigress.

An hour later Torkum came into the office and said, "I just saw Cope leaving town, Bogard, and asked about you."

"Well?" said Barney getting to his feet.

"I want you to stay on with me. There's things about this sheriff job I don't savvy. Cope said you might stay on, at least for a while."

It was sort of a back handed request since Torkum had used the name of Little John Cope and, for an instant, Barney was inclined to refuse. But he needed a little time to straighten things out and make plans for the future, so he nodded agreement.

It was because of that reason alone that he was still deputy sheriff a week later when a telephone call came for him. He answered it, leaning against the office wall and prepared to jot down on the old scratch pad any information or complaint given. But he stiffened suddenly as he recognized the throaty voice of Pauline Pringle coming over the wire.

"Barney," she said anxiously, "Little John has just been shot and he's calling for you."

"Shot! Is he hurt bad, ma'am?"

"The doctor says it's serious."

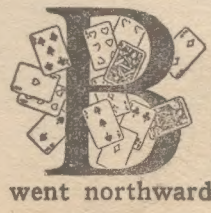
"Who did it?"

"We don't know. Will you come at once? He's asking for you."

"I'm leaving now," snapped Barney. "I'll be there sometime tomorrow morning." He hung up and flung about to snatch the badge from his vest and slam it down on the desk. His face was a mask of cold fury as he growled, "Took him up to her place and got him shot! Took him to green pasture!"

CHAPTER II

Mesa Enemy



BARNEY BOGARD'S car was old, a relic when he bought it, but it had always served the purpose up to now. All night long as he went northward he fought the antics

and perversity of the car, crowding it to the limit and praying that it would hold together. In his mind was the picture of Little John lying in bed badly wounded, perhaps dying. He had called for him, Barney, and by the great gods he'd get there if he had to hold the old car together by sheer will power.

With dawn he was rolling across a flat country with the blue of a high mesa lifting in the distance ahead. The car was steaming and there was an ominous knocking under the hood. Perhaps there was a town ahead where he could pause for oil and water and to make inquiries; he did not know the location of the Pringle ranch.

He came to a fork in the road where a wooden bridge spanned a small stream. One fork led westward, seeming to aim for a group of buildings a mile farther on. The other fork headed on across the bridge, winding northward toward the mesa. He slowed down to make a decision and was surprised to see a figure appear from the willows lining the stream and wave a hand at him.

"Teresa!" he exclaimed in great surprise.

She came toward him quickly, the rising sun making of her face a delicate cameo outlined in a frame of golden hair. "Hello, Barney Bogard. I've been waiting for you, to show you the way home."

"Waiting all night?"

"Oh, no; just since five o'clock. Tony brought me down and then went back with some special medicine. Mother asked me to wait here at the forks for you." She eyed the old car critically. "But I don't think we can make it up to the mesa in that. It's a steep climb."

"How else, Teresa?"

She thought for a moment and then waved a hand to the west. "We'd better go on into town and get a couple of horses from the livery barn." She climbed in beside him and he turned left across the bridge. Listening, she shook her head. "You couldn't make it with this car."

"How is Little John?" he asked as he pressed the throttle to the floor.

"Very bad, Barney. He was shot in the back and the bullet did something to his spine."

"In the back! Little John Cope shot in the back! What a lousy ending for him. Who up here would do such a thing?"

"We don't know, Barney. The three of us, Uncle John, mother and I, were out riding, up near the northwest corner of the ranch, and all of a sudden Uncle John pitched out of the saddle. We managed to get him home, although it took all of Mother's strength. She's very strong, you know."

"From what direction did the sound of the shot come?"

"We heard no shot, none at all. He just fell off the horse. We thought it was his heart until we saw the blood."

Barney's car came to a wheezing stop before the livery barn in Brewster. Teresa jumped down and called to a man in the corral behind the barn. Quickly she explained their need and the man led out two horses. While he saddled one, Barney took his own saddle from the back of the car and cinched it on the other. Within ten minutes after their arrival they were loping back down the road toward the forks.

Teresa Pringle rode well but Barney wasn't surprised. Her mother had been one of the best women riders in the world. The horses were fresh and they did not spare them, reaching the base of the mesa in half an hour. Then began a winding climb up a rutted road and the pace was necessarily slowed to such an extent that the girl began to chafe.

"These are not like our horses," she informed him. "If I had Zulu here I'd go up this hill on the jump. Zulu is our Arabian stallion."

So there were Arabian horses on the Pringle ranch. Barney wasn't surprised to hear this, for Pauline Pringle would, no doubt, have the best in horseflesh.

He thought nothing more about it, being more concerned with the girl who rode beside him and his mission. She had said there was no sound of a shot, and this information found a groove in his mind. Maybe Little John could tell him more, give him some idea of a possible motive. It could not have been a case of mistaken identity. Three of them had been riding together and certainly no one could mistake the tall, bent form of Little John Cope in the saddle.

Once at the top of the mesa they urged their mounts to a fast lope and soon covered the intervening mile between it and the ranch. Barney, in spite of his state of mind, was greatly impressed by what he saw as he approached the place. A row of white cottages was set in a semi-circle facing a massive building that all but filled the throat of the crescent. A wide veranda studded with huge white pillars faced the court. In the center, lifting above the rest of the structure, was a large dome, the upper half of which was made of glass which reflected the sunlight from a thousand facets. It was elaborate, to say the least.

They dismounted before the veranda and Teresa took the reins of both horses. Barney went up the veranda steps and, at a wide door, met Pauline Pringle. Her smile of welcome was mechanical and did not disguise the expression of anxiety on her face. A long night of vigil had put dark shadows under the amber eyes; the light of day disclosed streaks of silver in the tawny tresses that fell richly about her shoulders.

"How is he?" asked Barney.

She shook her head and said, "Come."

He followed her across the floor of a huge and circular living-room, avoiding the yawning heads of numerous animal skins scattered about, and came to the foot of a broad stairway that led to a balcony that circled the room below. From this balcony numerous doors led to bedrooms. Light from the glass dome above softly suffused the whole interior.

"In here, Barney," leading the way through a door.

As they entered, two men stood up. One was quite young and had the unmistakable air of the professional man. The other was nearing sixty and was tall and gaunt. His thin hair was quite gray, his deep-set eyes brooding and moody.

"Doctor Kaye and my foreman, George Laylord," introduced Pauline Pringle.

Barney nodded briefly to the men and then looked beyond to the bed. It was worse than he had pictured it in his mind; Little John was ghastly gray and seemed shrunken in size. He lay on his side and his breath was uneven. But his eyes were open and moved slowly until they rested on Barney's face. It seemed to all present that there was a momentary smile of relief at the corners of his wrinkled lips.

"What goes on, old-timer?" said Barney, reaching down to clasp a white hand.

"He's partially paralyzed," spoke up Doctor Kaye. "He speaks only with great difficulty. The bullet injured his spine."

Barney knelt down beside the bed so that he could look into Little John's eyes. "Got any ideas, John?" he asked.

Little John Cope gathered air into his lungs. "Look—look—for Juh—Juh—" It was all he could say; his eyes closed from exhaustion. Barney stood up and looked down on him, and there welled up a wild hatred for the person who had so treacherously shot down his best friend. He stood there tensely, until he was sure of his voice. "You rest now, John. Later we'll get into this."

Little John opened his eyes again; once more he gathered his failing strength. His tongue was almost beyond any control but he managed to whisper, "Watch out—the Kid."

Barney looked at the faces about him; they shook their heads.

"Don't any of you know what he's trying to say?" asked Barney.

"His mind is wandering," declared Kaye.

"I don't believe it! He must mean something about a jug, and something about a Kid. Think hard!"

Again they shook their heads. Baffled and upset, Barney left the room, followed by Pauline Pringle and her foreman. She said, "You men go downstairs and wait. I'll have the cook make up some coffee."

In the living-room below Barney sat down on a huge davenport, resting his head against the back. In this manner he stared up at the big dome above, and saw, on the east side of it a large stained-glass window. It was made up of many pieces of varied colored glass, heavily leaded, which had been formed into the picture of a woman astride a pure white horse. It had been so placed that the first rays of the morning sun would shine through it, and Barney had no difficulty at all in recognizing the form, features and hair of the rider. It was Pauline Pringle.

George Laylord was pacing up and down, smoothing his scanty gray locks. Now and then he glanced at Barney and seemed about to speak.

Presently Barney asked, "Got any ideas, Laylord?"

"Plenty. I mean I'm thinking a lot. But there's a difference between thinking and having proof."

"Then John Cope does have an enemy here?"

"That's what I think, what I know in my own mind."

"A jug or some person called the Kid?"

"No. I mean—" Laylord halted as Pauline Pringle entered and advanced with a pot of coffee. She was standing before them when Doctor Kaye called from the balcony above. They all turned to face him, watch him spread his hands in a helpless gesture, and knew that Little John Cope had gone at last to that real green pasture of eternity.

CHAPTER III

The Assassin Strikes Again

IT WAS the day after Little John was buried out on the mesa that Barney and the foreman stood leaning against the bars of the horse corral watching Tony Patterson exercise Zulu, the Arabian stallion. The other men on the ranch had gone about various duties, riding off silently in respect to the grieving women inside the house.

"You're staying on?" asked Laylord.

"Until I find the killer," said Barney. "I've nothing to go on but those few words Little John spoke. I've got to tie those words into something, get some more information. I can use your ideas, what you've got in mind. If Little John has an enemy here he's an old one; it starts way back along the line somewhere. Can you go back for me?"

"Back to Hollywood and the old days of the silent movies," said Laylord.

Laylord told it briefly. There were three of them on the mesa at present who had worked together in pictures: Pauline Pringle, Walt Wolfe and himself, George Laylord. Little John Cope, so named for his great height and strength, had been a fourth, and always took the part of the sheriff. But he and Walt Wolfe had never been friends; quite often hot words had been exchanged between them. The enmity had been built up over the years, until Walt Wolfe had quit the business. He was now leasing a part of the Pringle range from Pauline, with an option to buy if he made good. He had come to her broke and desperate, and for old times' sake she had set him up in business, against Laylord's advice.

"So you think Walt Wolfe is the killer? That he carried his hate for Little John all these years?"

"I do. In addition, Wolfe knew that old John was a keen lawman and would start checking up on the stock we've been losing, both cattle and horses."

"How about the local law, didn't you call it in?"

Laylord shrugged in disgust. "Buff Jones, in Brewster, is the sheriff, but he's solid ivory from ear to ear. Besides, the Pringle outfit has never been too popular in this country. They call us high hat."

"One more question," said Barney. "Where is Pauline's husband?"

"Terry Devore was killed the first year we were here, by a horse. Devore is Pauline's married name and Teresa's. Pauline has kept her movie name through two marriages."

"Married before, eh?"

"To a no-good bum, Bogard. When she first went into the movies she met a fellow by the name of Patullo. He was handsome and dashing, and she fell for him. When she learned he'd been married before and was no good, she cut him loose. He went to South America and we heard later that he'd been killed in some political revolution down there."

Barney nodded and built a cigarette. He smoked it in silence, watching Tony Patterson handle Zulu. Tony had a way with him when it came to handling horses, no question of that. It was easy to understand why the boy was kept at the ranch to take care of the Arabians.

"Well, thanks," said Barney, flipping away his cigarette and turning across the court to the house.

Entering the big living-room, he paused before the massive fireplace and lapsed into thought. He was forming some opinions and a conviction or two. This whole Pringle spread was, in a manner, out of step with the accepted ideas of ranching. It was too big, too rich. And yet it had a definite permanency here on this vast mesa. Pauline had made something of the place, of the mesa, and, without question, had aroused envy and perhaps enmity by so doing. Smaller fry were nipping at her heels, making trouble. But could he hook this up with the killing of Little John Cope?

"A penny for your thoughts down there."

Barney turned and looked up at the balcony. Pauline Pringle stood leaning against the carved railing, arms widespread and a smile on her lips. Clad in a loose gown and with her hair falling about her neck, she made a handsome picture. Soft light was kind to her.

"Pauline," he said abruptly, "I once heard you tell Little John that you needed him here. Why?"

She stiffened slightly. "I don't think that you understand me, Barney," she said. "I'm one of those women who need the companionship of men who speak my language. Little John was one of those men. Besides, he was an old friend." She paused and Barney waited. "Well, yes, I needed him for another reason. We've been losing stock. But I swear I would never have brought him here if I'd known this would happen."

Barney nodded. "Mind if I borrow a horse? I want to ride out to where he was shot."

"Why, no; go right ahead. Take any horse you like."

He left her there gazing after him and seemed to feel the probe of her amber eyes as he went out the door. In the barn he followed along behind the line of box stalls, until he heard voices beyond at the end of the barn.

"But I tell you, Tony, that I don't understand love, so how could I love you?"

"Teresa, I've told you time and again that I will show you what love is," said Tony Patterson, his voice vibrant with passion.

"But we're too young. I'm just eighteen and you're only twenty. And you've only been here three months."

"Those three months have been like three years, just waiting for you. Listen, Tess. We could slip out tomorrow, even tonight, and be married in Brewster."

"Oh, no!" gasped the girl. "Mother wouldn't like that at all. No, I can't

do it, Tony. You're nice and I like you, but I'm afraid it isn't what they call love."

"I won't wait forever," he said tensely. "I'll—I'll run off with you."

"I don't think so," she said, a new note in her voice. "After all, I know what I want to do with my life."

"It's somebody else — that Bogard fella that just came here. If it is, I'll kill him."

Barney smiled and held his place. Tony Patterson had it bad and it was difficult to blame the lad. Teresa was a beauty. He heard her say, "Why, I scarcely know Barney Bogard."

"But you told me he saved you trouble down in that other town. He's your hero, I bet. Girls are like that, always falling in love with some fella that saves 'em."

Teresa Devore made some indignant remark and came quickly up the line of stalls. Barney stepped in beside a horse, speaking calmly. "Yes, I think you'll do, boy. I'll ride you out. . . . Oh, hello, Tess," as she passed. "I'm riding out to see the place where Little John was shot. Want to come along?"

She hesitated but an instant. "Yes, I do, Barney. I can show you where it happened."

He saddled an Arabian for her and the gelding of mixed blood for himself; and presently they loped out of the yard, heading north and watched by a dark-haired lad whose face was flooded with passion.

Barney got his first real perspective of the Pringle mesa during that ride. It was much larger than he had suspected, comparatively flat except a gentle roll along the west rim and a wide groove, almost a valley, that bisected it from east to west. It was in this valley that the grass was richer, fed by a stream; and here was where the large proportion of the stock was held. He could see cattle strung out all along the bottom of it, beside the stream; and riders stationed on the ridges above.

"Yonder," said Teresa, pointing. "We were coming in past those scrub oak when it happened. Uncle John was asking Mother some questions about the men on the ranch when he suddenly pitched over and fell to the ground. But we never heard a sound of gunfire. Why was that?"

"The killer used a Maxim silencer, Tess."

"Goodness! What is that?"

"An arrangement that fits over the muzzle of a gun and deadens the sound of the explosion."

They passed the scrub oak and cir-

LITTLE JOHN COPE

cled around to the east, following the mesa rim. There was no surface cover for a killer but that rim. Barney looked back and judged the distance to be at least two hundred yards. Not a difficult shot for a man who knew rifles; certainly not so far that there could be a mistake in identity.

"Where is Walt Wolfe's place?" he asked.

"Oh, that's at the northeast corner of the mesa. It's the old place, where we lived while the big house was being built."

"Does he live there alone, work the place by himself, or—" He broke off abruptly. Something had snapped at the brim of his hat. "I'll see Wolfe later," he resumed in the same tone.

Teresa Devore was not to be de-

ceived. She had seen the involuntary jerk of his head and was now staring at the split brim. "Quick," he cried. "Ride zigzag."

He kicked his horse forward and she joined him. "Go on home," he called to her. "Straight home, and don't say anything about this."

"You're going after him!" as he changed course and swung off to the left. "Let me go. I'm not afraid."

"Home!" he yelled and bent low over the horse's neck.

In his swift dash back toward the mesa rim he looked over his shoulder just once and saw that she was reluctantly obeying his command. He had no sure direction, no certainty from just where the shot had come; and when he dipped over the edge, which was not as abrupt as the south side of the mesa, he could see no one.

For ten minutes he coursed along just under the rim, hand on gun and eyes searching the breaks below. It was more instinct than suspicion that made him turn in the saddle and glance back. The sun glinted on the barrel of a gun; there was another vicious hiss near his head. He spun the gelding and raced back, aiming for a rising bosom on the slope. When within a hundred yards of it, a white horse broke into view, running toward the east and clearing the ground with magnificent leaps.

The mixed blood gelding had great speed and stamina, but he could not gain on the white horse. In a short time Barney saw that he was, in fact, losing ground; the gelding was up against a better horse. But if the rider were intent on killing him why was he running? He had a rifle, all the advantage. Of course there was the chance of a miss, a bad break which would reveal his identity.

Barney lost the man completely in the second mile of the chase, in a labyrinth of draws and gullies that forced him to work upward toward the mesa rim. Letting the gelding halt for breath, he let his eyes wander down that broken slope, to where deeper blue marked the flatter land beyond. It would be a great place for rustlers to hide.

At length he went on, knowing disappointment, until he came to a grove of trees that fringed the rim. He passed through them and came into a clearing where stood a large log house from the chimney of which blue smoke was drifting. Dismounting, he advanced on foot and poked his head through the door of a barn. An unsaddled horse stood there. He went to the door of the house which stood open, and came face to face with a man who stood better than six feet and was broad of shoulder.

"What's on your mind?" asked Walt Wolfe, fastening his close-set eyes on the visitor.

"I am Barney Bogard," said Barney.

"Yeah, I'd guessed that already. And you've been listening to Laylord. Well, I didn't kill John Cope. You tell Pauline that for me."

"You're a couple of jumps ahead of yourself, Wolfe. I didn't say I'd been listening to Laylord. I'm out to look over the land and see if I can locate a rifle with a silencer on it."

"Silencer!" with narrowing eyes. The man patted his hip. "Here's my weapon."

Barney nodded. "I didn't see you at the funeral, Wolfe."

"I can tramp on that old fool's grave later. Why should I bother to see him planted when I've hated his guts for years? Furthermore, I've got no use for his friends, don't want 'em prowling around my place."

"I get the drift," said Barney. "But how about Pauline Pringle?"

"She's different; they don't come any better."

Barney tried to see past the big form of the man who blocked his way into the house. "Where's Jug—or Jude?"

"Who?"

"I thought maybe he or the Kid would be here."

It was a random shot but brought no results except a puzzled expression

from Walt Wolfe. "Never heard of 'em," he growled. "Either you're nuts or you're trying to bait me into something. I ain't fond of that stuff, so pull your freight."

"Right neighborly of you," murmured Barney and stepped back from the door.

"And you tell George Laylord that if he goes spreading it around that I killed Cope, he'll hate the day he was born."

"Come down and tell him yourself," advised Barney.

He mounted his horse and rode back across the mesa. He had formed an instant dislike for Walt Wolfe, and he was far from satisfied that the man was so wholly innocent as he professed. But of one thing he was sure: Wolfe had not taken that shot at him from the mesa rim.

"Stamp on Little John's grave, eh?" he said to himself as he loped along. "If I ever catch him at it, I'll blow out the partition between his snaky eyes."

CHAPTER IV

Barney Checks Up

HIS return ride took Barney through the mesa valley and he had a close look at the large herd kept there. The Herefords were in fine condition, well fed and contented. Five men watched them, stationed at various points along the valley. Barney hadn't made up his mind about those men. Some seemed to know what it was all about, but there were others who would make better riders for a movie than hands in the cattle business.

As he approached the ranch he saw Teresa perched on the top bar of the horse corral, looking out across the mesa. Was it possible that she was there waiting for him, worrying about him? It was a pleasant thought, at least; and later it was confirmed. She jumped down and went with him into the house. Once inside she caught his arm, gripped it tightly.

"Any luck, Barney?" she asked.

"None so far as catching that gulcher is concerned. But I saw Walt Wolfe and the old place. I'm not satisfied with the setup there, and one of these nights I'm going back for another look."

"You've got to be careful, Barney. Mother seems to think that Walt is all right but I've never liked him. I saw a big bull snake once and—well, Walt Wolfe reminds me of the thing."

Barney placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled down into her eyes. "That's a fairly accurate description, Tess, but you mustn't be afraid of him."

"Oh, I'm not afraid. Really, I'm not afraid of anything much." She said it sincerely, her blue eyes fixed on his face.

"Not even of love?" he inquired softly.

"Why—why—" she faltered.

There was a step on the balcony above and Pauline Pringle said, "Break it up you two!" Her hands, clutched around the balcony railing, were white with strain and she was breathing fast. "Tess, you go see if the cook has supper ready. Barney, you come up here now. I want to talk with you."

He ascended the stairs and joined her, smiling at the set of her lips and eyes. Again she was the tigress protecting her young.

"Look, Barney Bogard," she said tensely. "You're here for any other purpose than to make love to Teresa. I want that understood right now."

"She's a mighty sweet and loveable girl, Pauline. I savvy how you feel but you've got to come to it some day—her meeting a man and loving him."

"Perhaps. But it won't be you, Barney. When Tess marries it will be to a gentleman, and they're mighty scarce in this world." She took several deep breaths. "Don't misunderstand me, Barney. I don't mean that you're

not a gentleman in the accepted sense. I have another tally for a real gentleman. There's been only two in my whole experience in life. One was my husband, Terry Devore; the other was Little John Cope."

"You must have had bitter experiences with other men."

"Yes. Bitterness and disappointment. Tess isn't going to have that same experience if I can help it. . . . Well, that's that! Now I've something for you along your own line." She reached into her bosom and brought out a scrap of paper. "Read that!"

Barney read. The note said: "Get rid of Bogard or he is next." It was printed in a scrawl, a hasty job. "Hmn," mused Barney. "Where did you get this?"

"I found it pinned to the back of the davenport this afternoon. How it got there, who put it there, I don't know. I hate such things!"

"Not nice," agreed Barney. "I'll just take charge of it, if you don't mind." Without another word he went downstairs and out of the house.

Tony Patterson was in the barn currying Zulu and still nursing a savage resentment. He looked up as Barney approached, weighted the currycomb in his hand and set his full lips.

"You shouldn't have done it, Tony," said Barney. "It's a damned cheap trick."

"What you talkin' about?" demanded the boy.

"You know what I'm talking about—that note you left on the davenport this afternoon. You tried to take advantage of Cope's death to scare your boss. If you don't like me, why don't you be a man and come to me about it?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Yes you do! There was nobody here this afternoon but you and George Laylord, and he wouldn't do it."

"I never left a note," sullenly.

"Listen, Tony, you're a good hand with horses and I don't want to see you lose your job. But if Pauline Pringle learns of this you're out. Now speak up and confess, say you're sorry."

Red had built up in Tony's face until his dark features were brick-colored; his eyes had become dark pools of hate. With a swift and vicious move he hurled the currycomb straight at Barney. Barney dodged, but the teeth of the comb raked one ear and the torn brim of his hat. Barney lunged forward and fastened a hand in the front of the boy's shirt. He shook him back and forth and then slammed him back against the side of the stall. Tony kicked him sharply in the shins.

"You damned fool!" growled Barney. "Quit this!"

Tony kicked again and then struck with a clenched fist. He was lithe and strong, as hard as nails and difficult to hold. Barney finally had to bring the flat of his hand across his mouth, rocking his dark head back and bringing blood to the full lips. That seemed to take much of the fight from Tony. He dropped to his knees and felt of his bruised mouth.

"I—I didn't mean to do it, Bogard. It was because I was mad."

"All right. But don't try such a thing again. There's trouble enough at this place without you adding to it."

"You won't tell Miss Pringle?"

"No."

"It'd be the death of me if I had to leave here."

"Oh, I don't think it would be that tough on you, Kid. Now, act like a man."

Barney turned from the stall but was halted by the sight of Pauline Pringle and Teresa standing in the runway. The older woman stood with feet braced apart and hands on her hips. Barney knew at that moment she had witnessed the whole affair.

"Mighty generous of you, Barney," she said. "Mighty generous of you. When you left the house so quickly I suspected you had something on your mind about that note. So I followed you." She shifted her attention to

Tony Patterson. "Saddle your pinto and get ready to ride," she snapped at him.

"Please," he begged, "don't make me go."

"You're getting out. I'll have no snakes about this place. Come by the house and I'll have your pay check ready for you." She turned away abruptly, taking Teresa with her.

"Speak to her for me?" pleaded Tony to Barney.

"She's the boss, Tony. Better saddle up and drift."

Tony Patterson's demeanor changed swiftly. "She'll be sorry!" he hissed. "You'll be sorry. You think I'm just a kid, but I'll show the whole damned outfit of you."

"Oh, shut up," said Barney in disgust and left the barn. But once outside he considered the venomous threat more seriously. Tony had hot blood in his veins and, apparently, little conscience. Just a kid, but—Kid! Little John Cope had mentioned the Kid.

TESS

Watch out for the Kid! Could he have meant Tony Patterson?

Tony was not long in leaving the ranch, nor did he stop at the house for his pay. Mounted on a pinto pony, he tore out of the yard and sped for the south rim of the mesa, vanishing into the shadows gathering there. George Laylord joined Barney in the court, shaking his head. "Pauline was never overly fond of Tony," he said, "but she kept him on because he was such a good hand with the horses."

As they stood there, voices issued from the house. Pauline Pringle was speaking harshly, and Barney guessed that Tony's love-making was being revealed for the first time. But gradually Teresa's voice came clearer, speaking to her mother, as Laylord whispered, as she never had before. "Pauline has always dominated her too much. I've been looking for this to happen. Tess has a mind of her own."

Barney changed the subject. "How many men do you keep on guard at night, Laylord?"

"Two on moonlit nights; more when it's dark."

"And still you lose cattle?"

"Now and then. I wouldn't call it a raid. More like a pick-up of strays. I've tried to hire more help, offered good money for riders, but it seems that among men hereabouts it's in the nature of a disgrace to ride for the high hat Pringle outfit. And speaking of hats — high and otherwise — what happened to yours?"

"Our friend with the silencer on his gun took a crack at me this afternoon. I chased him for a ways, but he was better mounted. Don't say anything to Pauline about it. I'm going to hawk that north rim until I get a crack at him. Think I'll take a pasear over that way now."

"I'll ride a way with you."

They saddled up and rode from the ranch. On the way by the mesa valley Barney relayed Walt Wolfe's warning, and the foreman grimaced. He said, "I'm going to press Pauline to take up that lease of Wolfe's. He's no good; hasn't kept up the payments."

For reasons of his own Barney suggested that they make a circle and come to the valley from the east end. This they did, dropping off a ridge just as one of the riders started pushing a

small bunch of strays westward toward the main herd. Neither this rider nor Laylord saw the ragged silhouette of another horse standing half hidden behind a hummock two hundred yards away. But Barney saw it and, with a gesture to the foreman to go on, turned and angled off in that direction.

"Like as not I'm inviting it," murmured Barney to himself, "but I got to get nearer."

His approach was casual but his eyes were fixed on that silhouette and his hand ready to gun. He was making as though to turn down the valley again when he suddenly wheeled, set spurs and made the dash. Bent low in the saddle he saw, over the bobbing head of his horse, the shadow disintegrate rapidly. The horse wheeled and a man went into the saddle with a bound. But before he could get under way Barney was beside him, gun out and leveled.

"Oh, it's you!" he said recognizing the big form of Walt Wolfe.

"Yeah; and so what?"

"Just checking up, that's all. This spread has been losing cattle."

Despite his surprise at the sudden dash toward him, Wolfe managed to follow the code. "I was checking up myself" he said. "Some of my beef got mixed up with the Double P and I came over to see if Pauline's men had cut 'em out. They haven't, and I was going to speak to 'em about it when I saw you and Laylord ride in. I don't want to meet that gent, so I held off."

The glib explanation was plausible enough, but the man's first attempt at flight was suspicious. Barney just nodded. "I'll tell Laylord," said he.

"Never mind about that. I'll talk to one of the other men tomorrow." He bent a sharp look on Barney. "Have you gone to work for Pauline?"

"Nope," replied Barney. "I'm still working for Little John Cope."

Walt Wolfe nodded stiffly, waved a hand in parting salute and loped off in the direction of his own place. He was still feeling the effects of Barney's swift approach.

CHAPTER V

Tony's Revenge

ARRIVING at the large log house, Walt Wolfe dismounted and went inside. It was dark in there but the odor of tobacco smoke told him what he wanted to know. He called softly, "Julian?"

The reply was so instant and so near to him that he jumped involuntarily. A form appeared from the shadows beside the open door. "I thought you was out picking up a few more Double P strays, Walt."

"I was over there but damned near got picked up myself. That fella Bogard again. Tricky as hell and got eyes like a hawk." Wolfe went to a table, struck a match and touched off a lamp. The yellow glow revealed the other man by the door, tall, rather gaunt, with penetrating black eyes and lips the thickness of a sheet of paper. The dark eyes, unblinking like those of a snake, fastened on Wolfe with burning intensity.

"Bogard, eh?" came through the thin lips. "I had him figured out right. A pest."

"Well, you can lay your last dime he's looking for y—well, the man who drilled Cope."

"I should have got Bogard today," said the man with ominous softness. "He was lined up just perfect in the sights."

"Look, Julian. We were gettin' along all right before he came. No trouble to fool Laylord or that bunch of coots he's got working for him. It's fixed so he can't hire any real men, too. But this Bogard puts things in different shape. He knows his stuff too well to be fooled easy. We can't let him hang around and start snoopin'."

"You talk like a man afraid," declared his companion.

"I ain't afraid of man nor devil. I'm just saying—"

"Yes, you're just saying. I've heard enough of it."

"Why, sure, Julian." Wolfe dodged back as the man called Julian made a quick move forward. With one swipe of his hat he blasted out the lamp flame. "Somebody coming!" he hissed and glided back toward the door.

Walt Wolfe crouched beside him as they peered out across the clearing.

"Ridin' a white horse," he whispered. "Bogard, by God! That fella has the nerve of the devil."

"Wait! Leading a spare horse, a pinto. Bogard wouldn't do that. Why, damn it all, it's Tony. What's he doing up here?"

Tony Patterson came forward slowly to halt finally before the house. Here he sat waiting, listening, ready to break into flight at the first wrong sound. Twice he cleared his throat, and at last he called, "Walt? You here?"

The two men in the doorway stepped out. "What's the meaning of this?" snapped Julian. "You've been told not to come here. What horse is that you're riding?"

"It's Zulu." There was a tremor of triumph in Tony's voice. "I stole him tonight."

"Stole him! From the Pringle barn? Why, you damned idiot! I've a notion to—"

"Wait!" cried the boy anxiously. "Let me tell you about it. I was fired."

"So?" The tall, gaunt man advanced and laid a hand on Tony's leg, the steel-like fingers biting like a trap. "You were told to stay there at all costs."

"I would of been if it hadn't been for Barney Bogard."

"Him again! Well, go on."

"I've been trying to get Teresa to marry me, been working hard at it, and I think I might have managed it in time. And then Bogard came and she went riding with him. I saw the way she looked at him, the way he looked at her, and it made me mad. I wrote a note and left it in the house where Miss Pringle could find it. I told her to get rid of Bogard or he'd be next."

"Smart! Very smart. Like hell!" Julian yanked the boy from the saddle and hurled him up against the log side of the house. Zulu snorted and backed off. "How in hell did I beget such a fool?" cried the dark man angrily. He followed up, slapping Tony's head from side to side. Walt Wolfe offered no protest; this was Julian's affair.

"Please!" begged Tony.

"That's right; bawl like your ma did. No guts. No savvy. You get fired for a fool trick when you're supposed to

PAULINE PRINGLE

stay on that spread until you talk Teresa into marrying you. For revenge, you steal the white stallion, a horse that can't be handled in any market without being recognized. It's been tough enough peddling those other Arabia strain horses. You let Bogard get your goat and—oh, hell!"

Julian paced the length of the yard and back. Tony Patterson leaned against the house, breathing heavily and dark eyes smouldering with wrath that dared no other outlet. Wolfe rolled a cigarette and smoked nervously.

"We've got to get Bogard," said the man, halting before them. "It's got to be done soon and I think I know the way. Got to trap him. Get close to him. "We'll do it down in Brewster.

Walt, you and I ride tonight." Turning on Tony, he went on, "As for you, you sniveling idiot, pack up some grub and get the hell out of here. Take that white stallion down into the breaks north of the mesa and stay there. You'll find a pile of rocks and a ledge below them. That's where I've been camping." He waved a hand at Wolfe. "Get ready."

AFTER his encounter with Wolfe, Barney did not rejoin Laylord but cut off across the valley and headed for the north mesa rim. There was no question in his mind but that the man who had killed Little John was also the man who had taken a pot shot at himself. He was not now so sure that it was a case of personal enmity, but thought it rather a fear of the law. In which case Sheriff Buff Jones was either no good and need not be feared or he was certainly mixed up in it somewhere.

Reaching the rim, he paused to gaze down into the breaks below, quite conscious that he made an excellent target as he stood outlined in the moonlight. But he must draw fire if he were to discover his quarry; and this time he meant to follow on through, keep at it until he caught up. As his eyes swept westward, searching each shadow, they saw a movement off to the left, directly north of the scrub oak. Leaving the rim, he rode in that direction.

Their meeting was abrupt and startling; both were coming up the opposite sides of a ridge and were suddenly face to face. Barney's gun was out even as the other rider gasped. Then came recognition.

"Teresa! What are you doing out here this time of night?"

"Oh, Barney! I thought that I'd caught up with him."

"With who?" He dismounted and went forward to stand by her horse. For a moment she looked away from him, her lips quivering. When she didn't answer he reached up and lifted her down, stood her beside him. "Something else has happened," he guessed shrewdly.

"Barney, Zulu is gone — stolen. Right out of the barn. Zulu, our prize stallion!" Emotion shook her and she leaned against him.

Barney put his arm about her and felt her shoulders shaking. He was well aware that Zulu was her pride and joy.

"Tell me about it," he urged gently. "How did you discover it?"

"I was in bed but couldn't sleep. An hour ago I heard something going on in the barn—Zulu nickering as he always does when someone's preparing to saddle him. That sort of an anxious and eager nicker he gives when he knows he's going to have a run. I couldn't think who'd be saddling him, so I started to dress, and watched out the window of my room. But before I could get downstairs I heard him dash out of the yard. The last I saw of him was just a white streak headed north."

"Did you tell your mother?"

"I couldn't bear to do that. I just took another horse and tried to follow." She went on vehemently, "Barney, this is going too far! It's bad enough to steal some of our other horses, but Zulu—"

"Um-m-m," he murmured. "He just couldn't take it, eh?"

"Who?" eagerly.

"Why Tony, of course. Who else? The hot-headed fool! Came back for Zulu just as a revenge. Don't he know that horse will be recognized anywhere it goes?"

"He came this way, Barney."

Barney released her and said, "You stand right here between these two horses. I'm going to root along the rim and see if I can pick up the tracks." With eyes fastened on the ground he made his way westward along the ridge until he came to where the mesa rim turned southward. And here, under an overhanging comb, he saw fresh tracks. He knelt down and examined them and found that more than one horse had passed that way quite recently. He

LAYLORD

studied the tracks and saw that those of one horse were larger and deeper than the other, and nodded in satisfaction. Noting the general direction of them he returned to Teresa. "It was Tony," he confirmed. "He's riding Zulu and leading the pinto. I'll just trail him down."

"And I'm going along," she declared resolutely.

"Not a very good idea, Tess. I'm sort of a dangerous riding companion up here."

"But I can't go home and tell Mother that Zulu is gone!" she cried.

"Well, all right; but if somebody starts shooting you cut and run for it. Promise me?"

"Yes, Barney."

They rode down the slope until he picked up the tracks again, and then followed on over the rough ground below the rim. Those tracks told Barney a story of a boy undecided in his mind; they wound about among the breaks, pausing now and then as though Tony Patterson had stopped to debate with himself. But at last they showed a more definite trend and went on until they reached a spot below the grove of trees marking the location of Walt Wolfe's place. This was significant to Barney, but he did not mention it to Teresa.

They came into Wolfe's yard and saw that the house was dark. Barney had her remain in the shadows of the trees while he went forward to investigate. Before the house were numerous fresh tracks. He saw where Zulu had backed and reared; where boots had scuffed the ground near the wall of the house. To his practiced eye it was obvious that some sort of a scuffle had taken place. Then he found where two horses had kicked up dirt in hurried departure. But they were not the tracks of Zulu and the pinto. These crossed the yard, went past a corral and headed northward toward the breaks beyond the mesa rim.

"Something has happened here I can't quite savvy," he said after rejoining Teresa. "Two riders have left this place in a hurry, but Zulu and the pinto have headed north. Since Zulu is our aim we'll follow on. We can't be more than half an hour behind him."

"Maybe Walt Wolfe is taking Tony back to our place," she guessed.

"But not Zulu? That don't stack up, Tess. No, Walt and some other man left here, but Tony has gone on with the stud."

North of the house they came to a pasture where a small herd was bedded down. The cattle were all branded Circle W, Wolfe's brand, so Teresa told him. At the north end of the pasture, there in the soft ground around a small stream, they saw the clear prints of Zulu and the pinto.

It was twenty minutes later as their mounts were slogging down a steep incline to the bottom of a draw, that Barney saw just a flash of white below them. It was there—and then gone before he had time to call her attention to it. It could have been Zulu or that other white horse ridden by the mesa killer. He thought of this and of the two men who had ridden away from Wolfe's place. Was Wolfe friendly with the man who had shot Little John Cope? It was very possible.

They were soon in rougher country. The draw they rode was warted with

rocks partially washed free of the walls by rain and snow. But the tracks led on, both pair, and Barney learned by these that the horse ahead was Zulu.

At the very bottom of the draw stood a huge clump of boulders, and below them a ledge of shelving rock. Barney was thinking of what might be seen once they were around this barrier when the sidling rump of a white horse appeared. He drew up sharply and leaned toward Teresa.

"He's there, under that shelf."

"Watch out for him, Barney," she whispered. "Tony is just wild enough to start shooting, especially if he's caught with Zulu."

"I'm going to edge up and then make a dash for it," he told her. "I've got to get him before he mounts Zulu or we're out of luck. We couldn't catch that stud if we had wings."

He walked his horse forward until he was within two hundred feet of the ledge. Feeling that this was as near as he would get without revealing his presence, he set spurs and raced ahead. But with the first sharp thud of hoofs on the stony ground a figure darted from under the shelf, took one look up the draw and then made a wild dive for the white stallion. Zulu shied and snorted; Tony Patterson missed the stirrup and stumbled. Recovering quickly, he leaped again, landed behind the saddle but was skidded off by the fast circling of Zulu. As he landed on the ground Tony made another spring, this time for the pinto farther on. He landed on the bare back of the smaller horse and began kicking with his heels.

Barney was within thirty feet of the boy when Tony, flat along the pinto's neck, whipped out a gun and fired. The bullet nipped at the top ridge of Barney's hat and smashed into the rock beyond. Barney never reached for his own gun because Zulu had danced his way into the line of fire. Thus protected, Tony sped off to the north, the pinto running recklessly and unguided, shod hoofs striking fire from the rocks that covered the floor of the dwindling draw. Barney wasn't so much concerned with capturing Tony as he was in getting Zulu. If the stallion once started to run it would be the devil's own job catching him up again, he knew.

Zulu stepped on the dragging reins, jerked up his head and squealed in anger. The pinto was leading the way and he started to follow. Thoroughly upset and excited by Barney's swift approach and the roar of Tony's gun, the highly strung stud began to race along over the uneven ground, handsome head tossing the dangling reins. He made a beautiful picture there in the moonlight, one that Barney appreciated even as he shook out the noose of his rope.

It was a wild and reckless journey over the rough ground that formed the slope beyond the end of the draw. Twice Barney swung his loop, and missed. Tony Patterson had disappeared around a jutting bosom of land and this worried Zulu. Otherwise, Barney would never have been able to keep anywhere near him. He urged his mount to another burst of speed and made a last desperate cast. The loop settled over the white neck of the stallion and snapped tight.

Skidding hoofs sprayed rock all about. Zulu, feeling the bite of the rope on his neck and still supercharged with excitement, turned on his captor and came churning back. Barney avoided the first charge by kicking his horse to one side, but Zulu wheeled and struck out with both front hoofs, and one of them raked Barney's leg, breaking the skin under the chaps. The stallion reared up on his hind legs and stood poised there, ears laid back and teeth bared.

"Zulu! Stop it boy! Quiet now, you hear me?"

At the sound of Teresa's voice the horse flicked up an ear. With an angry toss of the white neck he dropped back to earth and circled until he could better see the girl who had come hurrying up to them. Barney let him have a little

slack on the rope but watched him warily.

"Talk to him, Tess," he said.

"Whoa, boy. Steady now. You're all right." She eased her horse forward until she could pat the damp white neck. "There! That's better. What's the idea of going loco this way?"

Zulu subsided, but there still was something not wholly normal in his eyes which rolled about in search of Tony Patterson. He whinnied shrilly and pawed at the ground. Teresa spoke to him again and, looking at her, Barney saw that her face was a white oval against the light of the moon.

"A close call, Tess," he said. "If Zulu had ever decided to run I don't believe the devil could have caught him. It's a wild country beyond here."

She began to blink rapidly and turned her head aside. "We just can't lose Zulu," he heard her say. "Oh, I hate that Tony Patterson. Aren't you going after him, Barney?"

"Not just now, Tess. I could catch him up now, but I have a hunch that there's larger profit in letting him go for the present. I want to discover the reason he rode to Wolfe's place tonight. Besides, I think it would be too risky to leave you alone with Zulu."

Barney ran his rope through both bit rings of the stallion's bridle and took a turn around the horn of his saddle. He doubted if the horse would create more real trouble, but wanted to be sure that no matter what happened, Zulu would not get away.

"He almost got you," said Tess, staring at the scraped chap. "But you understand that he didn't know what he was doing?"

"Sure."

"Barney, you've done a lot for Mother and me by getting Zulu back again. I've watched you follow the tracks, read them perfectly. You're a —well, a hawk, Barney."

"That sounds sort of vicious to me," he said with a grin.

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way," she hastened to say. "I meant that you were so sure, so very accurate and so—"

"I've had a lot of practice, Tess; this sort of thing has been my job."

Teresa wondered if there were scars about his body as mementoes of other encounters. The hat he now wore bore the marks of two attempts on his life. Some day a bullet would find a lower target. She hastily put this thought aside and, following a sudden impulse, leaned across to plant a kiss on his dusty cheek.

The touch of her lips did something to Barney Bogard. His hand shot out and gripped her shoulder. His eyes locked with hers. Then he let his hand fall away, as though he had laid hold of something very desirable that did not belong to him.

"You should never do that unless you mean it, Teresa," he said huskily.

"But Barney, I did mean it."

CHAPTER VI

Barney Senses a Trap

TONY PATTERSON was a tight bundle of hate and fear as he raced along on the pinto. Working his knees, he guided the pony across draws and up over ridges until, at last, he saw that he was not being followed. Looking back, he saw two riders, dimmed by distance, leading a white horse back up the draw, and he drew in a breath of relief. Bogard wasn't following him at all; he was taking Zulu back. But how had the man managed to trail him?

It gave Tony much food for thought, and brought to him an added fear of Barney Bogard. He would not be a man to fool around with very much. Tony waited for nearly an hour to make sure Bogard's return up the draw was not a ruse. During that time the boy felt pangs of hunger and remembered that the package of food he had prepared at Wolfe's house was tied behind the saddle on Zulu. Slowly and

cautiously he retraced the crooked trail he had come, until he could observe the rocks and the ledge where he had first halted. When he was sure there was no one about he went on, dismounted and began to search the gloomy cavern under that ledge. He found a blackened pot and a warped frying pan —and that was all. No food of any kind. Perhaps there was some hidden nearby, but he was in no mood to make an extensive search. He waited another hour and then remounted to make his way carefully back toward the large log house.

BARNEY found George Laylord in the mesa valley and turned over to him the white stallion. He didn't pause to explain the circumstances, leaving that to Teresa. After advising them to go straight back to the ranch, he turned around and made for Wolfe's place. Sooner or later the two men who had left there in such a hurry would come back, and he wanted to form a welcome committee of one, especially for the man who had ridden off with Walt Wolfe.

He formed his plan as he rode and, arriving at a spot west of the ranch and below the rim, he dismounted, hitched the gelding to a clump of brush that formed a partial screen, and went on afoot. He came to the grove of trees and drifted through them like a shadow. The house was still dark, the open door a black maw on the north side. After a period of watching and listening he crossed the yard and entered that door.

He made a hasty but intensive search of that log house but found nothing in the shape of evidence. It was apparent that Wolfe used but a small portion of the place—the kitchen, the living-room and a bedroom. All the windows on the east and south sides had been boarded up, and Barney decided that here was an extremely inconvenient place to be trapped.

Again back among the trees he chose a spot where he could observe the yard and the house, and settled down to wait. In the hour that followed, the silence keened his ears. Small and indistinct sounds were immediately identified and disregarded—the rustle of a rat in the barn loft; the uneasy shifting of a hooter in a tree above him. The westering moon cast long shadows over the yard, changed shapes and forms of things that were becoming familiar to sight.

He had been there less than an hour when something as indistinct as the shadows themselves seemed to flit across the yard. It paused before the open door of the house, lost in the darkness there. Barney slid forward to the tree ahead of him, went on to the next. He made no sound but, as he paused the second time, a dim figure came away from the blackness of the door and sent an anxious glance about the yard. He was there but a moment but Barney recognized Tony Patterson.

"The kid's got nerve," he told himself. "He had trouble here tonight and had reason to believe he'd have trouble if he came back; yet here he is."

Apparently assured that the place was deserted, Tony Patterson again entered the house. Barney could hear him poking about in the kitchen and, under the cover of those sounds, trotted quickly across the yard and took a stand near the door. He had not long to wait. Tony came back out carrying a flour sack into which he had stuffed some bread and a few cans of beans. As his boot hit the ground below the step something sharp dug into his ribs.

"Scratch air, Tony," said Barney calmly.

Tony Patterson drew in a sharp breath and let the sack fall to his feet. Slowly he turned his head to face his captor, revealing dark eyes round with a sudden spasm of fear. "B-Bogard!" he husked.

Barney lifted Tony's gun and retrieved the sack of food. "Where's your horse?" he asked.

"In the pasture, north of here."

"That's all right. Head west and walk fast."

"You turning me over to the sheriff?"

Barney thought he detected a note of hope in the question. "It depends," he replied.

"Look, Bogard. I was a fool to steal that stallion; I know it now. I was just mad because I'd been fired. When I got to thinking about it I decided to bring Zulu here and have Walt Wolfe take him home again."

"Wasn't you afraid Walt would make you come back with the stud?"

Tony Patterson wet his lips and thought fast. "Well, I wasn't going to tell Walt I'd stolen Zulu. Just say I'd caught the stud up after it busted out of the barn."

"That sounds mighty thin, Tony. I followed your trail to Walt's place. Something happened when you got here. What was it?"

"Nothin'," replied Tony sullenly.

"Who was the man here with Wolfe?"

"I didn't see any man with Walt. He was alone."

"You're lying! Two men left this place at about the same time you took Zulu on into the breaks. I want to know who the second man was."

"I tell you I don't know about some other fella." Tony clung to the denial desperately, for he was desperately afraid. This man Bogard could read events by simply looking at tracks.

"We'll let it ride for now," said Barney.

Arriving in the wash where he had left the gelding, he bound Tony's wrists with the boy's own belt. Tearing up the flour sack, he tied his ankles securely and fashioned a gag. He left him there on his back staring into the sky.

Barney resumed his watching post among the trees. Although he was a little tired by the night's events, his mind was alert and wrestling with problems. Of course Tony was lying; he had seen the second man. And Barney had a strong hunch that this second man knew a great deal about the killing of Little John Cope. Assuming that to be true, then Walt Wolfe was no angel. Tony was hooked in somewhere, too. What was the ultimate object of all this?

WALT WOLFE

The moon was not yet down in the west when day began to break in the east. Barney looked about him and decided that his present place of concealment would not serve in daylight. So he chose a tree near the edge of the yard and shinnied up to the middle branches, finding a fork where he could rest with a little comfort and still maintain his view.

He had been in this new post scarcely half an hour when he heard hoofs off to the right, and presently a rider came into view from the mesa beyond. The horse was Zulu and on his back, riding with magnificent carriage, was Pauline Pringle. She seemed a part of horse and saddle as she dashed into the yard, circled about and then sent a call toward the house.

"Walt Wolfe! Where are you, you liver-hearted double-crosser? Come out here, for I've something to say to you."

"Ma'am," called Barney cheerily, "your language is a tonic for man and beast."

She whirled in the saddle, producing

a gun from the belt of her riding breeches. "Who's there?" she demanded, searching the space among the trees with keen eyes.

"It's me, Barney, up in this tree."

She followed the sound of his voice, located him. "Humph! So you're Tarzan now!" When he'd slid down and was standing beside her she went on: "Waiting for Wolfe, eh?"

"And his friend."

"What friend, Barney?"

"The one who rode away with him last night. I'd like to meet up with that gent and ask some questions, mainly about the killing of Little John."

Pauline's amber eyes narrowed. "I didn't know Walt had a man here with him. You think it was he that shot from the mesa rim?"

Barney shrugged. "You've got to tally all factors; he's one of 'em. But why are you here?"

"Teresa and Laylord told me what happened last night. Just like that fool Tony to try such a thing. He's a crackpot. The reason I'm here is because Tony came here with Zulu. It looks to me like the kid expected Walt to help him out. Walt didn't keep hold of him; he sent him packing, with Zulu. When a man I've befriended doesn't lend me a hand in such a case, he's all through. Walt hasn't kept up his lease payments and I'm going to follow Laylord's advice at last and fire him off the mesa."

Barney nodded, looked up as she leaned down to rest a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks for what you did last night, Barney. When I found out that Tess was gone I suspected something, not pleasant, concerning you. I was wrong."

"Then Tess didn't tell you that she kissed me?"

The skin on Pauline's face was suddenly tight and her eyes blazed. "She didn't!" she declared.

"Yes, she did; but I'm afraid it was just a gesture of thanks for getting Zulu back again."

"Barney, don't you ever let it go any farther than that."

"Pauline," he said in turn, "I never make such promises."

Conflicting emotions surged through the tawney owner of the mesa. She conquered them at last and said, "I had a telephone call from Sheriff Buff Jones this morning. He said that your old car was still standing in the street in front of the livery barn and that no one in Brewster could get it started. He wants you to come down and do something about it."

"Yeah?" Barney stared thoughtfully at the ground. "Jones hasn't done a great deal to help you out, has he?"

"No; he's stupid and lazy. He thinks the Pringle ranch is too fancy for this country. I came here, bought the mesa and made something out of it, and ranchers hereabouts are jealous. It's a matter of policy for Jones to play ball with the others."

"Yeah, play the game with them," muttered Barney. "Well, we might as well go back, for I don't expect to see Wolfe or his friend here today."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because they're down in Brewster —waiting."

CHAPTER VII

The Trap Is Sprung

WAITING! The word Barney had uttered gave Pauline Pringle food for thought. But when he guided her to the wash where Tony Patterson lay bound, her surprise was such as to banish everything else from her mind for the time being. Surprise and, she must admit, admiration for Barney Bogard. It checked the flood of vituperation, so that Tony felt her wrath and disgust only in the looks she bent upon him. He well knew there was little use in appealing to her for mercy.

"Taking him to Jones?" she asked

after Barney had loaded the boy to the gelding's back and climbed on behind.

"I should say not. I'm going to pump Tony until I learn a few things."

"Well, I just thought that since you'd be going to Brewster this morning, you might take Tony along."

"But I'm not going to Brewster this morning; I'm going to let those gents stew in their own juice for a few hours. It's bad for their nerves, if they have any."

"Could you make it more plain?" she asked.

TONY PATTERSON

"Look, Pauline! Jones called up to have me come and move my car. Don't you think that, if they couldn't start the engine, they could push it out of the way? Very simple; as simple as their plan. The idea is to get me into town, close and handy to a nice assassination. They tried it up here and missed. In town, with noise and close shelter, they hope to have better luck."

"But why do they want your life?"

"Because I'm connected with the law; because I was a friend of Little John and am here to find his killer."

"There it goes back to the stealing of my stock," she said thoughtfully.

"It goes back further than that. I've a hunch that Tony here could even help us with that. Little John said with almost his dying breath, 'Look out for the Kid.' Who is the Kid but Tony? And I've another hunch that the man riding with Walt Wolfe is named Jug or Jud—something like that." Barney looked at Tony Patterson and saw that the boy's eyes were fixed on the gelding's ears.

Pauline Pringle then paid Barney the greatest compliment possible at the moment. "Barney Bogard," she said seriously, "if I were a man and outside the law, I'd hate like the very devil to have you on my trail." And immediately after saying this she felt an old surge of fear. Teresa's admiration for Barney might well grow into something bigger.

Tony Patterson maintained his attitude of ignorance concerning the second man at Wolfe's place and was thankful when, after a few pointed questions from Barney, he was placed in one of the empty cottages that faced the yard court. His wrists were still tightly bound; the door was locked and Laylord set himself up as a guard. This was much better than having Bogard work him over even though it was just a respite. It gave him time to think of an explanation to offer for his capture, once he was rescued by Walt Wolfe and his father. He hoped this would be soon, possibly after Bogard met up with the men in Brewster.

It was late in the afternoon before Barney prepared for town; he was now rested and ready. Pauline had the ranch car waiting and announced that she was going along. If Walt Wolfe was in Brewster she'd see him there and give him his walking papers. Barney offered no protest but climbed in beside her. Teresa waved good-by to them as they drove off, a smile on her lips that was both wistful and anxious.

It was Saturday, and Brewster was more than commonly active, what with all the surrounding ranchers in town. As the Pringle car came slowly into the street both men and women turned to look at it, and there was nothing friend-

ly in their glances; rather, a cold appraisal. Barney noticed this and also the set of Pauline's lips. Barney couldn't exactly blame her, but neither could he blame the others. They were poles apart.

ACROSS the way, seated in his office, Buff Jones was as unhappy as his limited intelligence would permit. He saw the Pringle car come down the street and turn into a vacant lot. He hoisted his bulk from the chair and moved to a rear door. "He's here," he announced. "Miz Pringle, too. Boys, I wish this could be done somewhere else. I hate to have the town messed up on Saturday."

"Oh, shut up!" growled Walt Wolfe. "You've had your pay, plenty."

"Yeah, but—"

"And you're a helluva big target. Do as you've been told."

Buff Jones resumed his chair, sweating at every pore. Walt Wolfe was bad enough, but that lanky and gaunt man with him, the fellow with the sunken and glittering eyes, gave the fat sheriff the shivers. He sat there gazing out the door of his office, saw Bogard and the Pringle woman consult briefly and then separate. His eyes followed the man until he was out of vision.

Walt Wolfe nodded to his companion when they reached the rear of the saloon. He went inside; the man called Julian kept on toward the livery barn. Walt lined up at the bar, swaying a little, and called for a drink. He talked thickly to the man next to him but kept his eyes on the street. Barney Bogard was walking along on the opposite side, but suddenly switched direction and came directly toward the saloon. Taken back by this action, Wolfe almost forgot his drunken rôle. He stood rigid as Barney came into the saloon and looked over the occupants.

"Wolfe," he said, bringing his cold attention to the man near the door, "Miss Pringle is in town and wants to see you."

"See me? What for, Bogard?"

"A matter of business, I think." He swept the figure before him with a caustic eye. "It couldn't be anything else. She's up the street."

"All right; see her in a little while. Have a drink?"

Barney shook his head. He was conscious of the silence that accompanied his departure. Could those others in the saloon have caught that feeling of some impending events?

The setting sun ran a red ribbon up the street and set up a glow against the windows facing it. Barney kept his eyes down, out of the glare, and came to the livery barn before which stood his old car. It was not in the same place he had left it, which supported his theory that it was bait for the trap. He did not go to it at once, but into the barn, and walked the length of that dim interior to peer out the rear door. To the east of the corral was a slovenly stack of hay, the only shelter available at the rear. He came back to the front and found the barn man waiting.

"Want the car moved?" he asked.

"Well, makes no difference to me, mister. The sheriff seemed to think it ought to be moved. I ain't no hand with them things m'self; don't know how to run 'em."

Barney nodded and moved toward the car. He had planned every step, every move. He jumped up into the seat but, instead of sitting down behind the wheel, he went right on out the other side, turned and sent a quick glance toward the stack of hay east of the barn corral. It was not over sixty feet away and he was sure he caught a slight movement near it.

"He's there," he told himself and bent down to lift that side of the engine hood. Propping it up he carefully removed his hat and held it so that the crown showed plainly above the rusted metal. He risked a glance down the street and saw that Walt Wolfe was standing outside the saloon fumbling with his gun. Presently, Barney figured, the mesa man would be shooting

into the air, venting his drunken exuberance. This was to cover what went on down at the barn. And the next instant the hat he held over the hood was jerked from his hand. There was no sound of a shot.

Barney dropped the hood and swung his gun over the radiator. He shot mostly at a streak of light that ran along a rifle barrel protruding around the stack of hay. His next shot was closer in, placed at about the spot a man would be standing. And then, almost immediately, Wolfe let go up the street, firing into the air and letting out a yell.

As was intended, the attention of those in the street was turned upon the mesa man; it was supposed that all the shots heard came from his gun. Barney shifted his position just as another bullet from the haystack smashed the windshield of the car. A long sliver of sharp glass pierced his cheek; another cut his eyebrow and started blood flowing. He dropped to the ground as though hit, threw his gun under the car and pulled the trigger. The rifle, which was now in plain sight, jerked upward. Some object fell from the end of the barrel.

Barney wiped the blood from his eyes, leaped to his feet and raced for the stack of hay. He knew that his last shot had struck the gulcher's gun and, if he was to take advantage of this, he must rush the man. A fierce desire to slay the killer of Little John spurred him on, lent speed to his feet. Lunging around the stack with gun raised, he found nothing. Reversing himself, he went the other way, with the same results. Pulling up, he passed the back of his left hand down his bloody cheek. What had become of the fellow?

There was some object at his feet. He stooped and picked it up—the smashed cylinder of a silencer. Tucking it into his pocket he stared about, looked up the grassy lane behind the row of buildings. It didn't seem possible, but the man must have made off during those brief seconds when his own vision was impaired. He started eastward, bent forward from the waist, gun cocked in a tight hand.

He had covered less than a hundred feet when the quick thud of hoofs broke out behind him. Whirling about, he saw a rider pass the west side of the corral behind the barn, make a quick circle to the west and disappear into the blood-red rays of the setting sun.

JULIAN

It was impossible to get a good look at him; Barney only knew that he had taken the wrong direction after leaving the stack of hay.

In that moment of bitter disappointment Barney gave no thought to the fact that he had matched sixgun with rifle and outshot the assassin. He stood there with jaws locked while blood ran into his lips and eyes. At length he resumed his march along the rear of the buildings, came to the open door of the saloon and passed through. Walt Wolfe was again at the bar calling loudly for drinks. He was still feigning intoxication, and those near him were smiling tolerantly. But Wolfe straightened with a jerk as, gazing into the backbar mirror, he saw Barney approaching.

Barney swung in beside the man, whipped Wolfe's still-warm gun from its holster and tossed it to one side.

He laid his own gun on the bar and stared into Wolfe's suddenly narrowed eyes.

"It didn't work, Walt," he said coldly. "Do you think I'm fool enough to fall for any such simple trick?"

Wolfe opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. Those close about began to spread away, forming a wide circle.

"I ought to gun-whip you to a frazzle," went on Barney. "It's all that you deserve. But since you are of my size and better, plus perfectly sober, I'm just going to let you have this!" He struck out with his right fist, putting all his hundred and eighty pounds behind the blow.

Walt Wolfe went backward on his heels, struck the front door-frame with his shoulders and bounced forward. With a throaty bellow he lowered his head and charged. Barney met him with body twisted to lend force to an uppercut that rocked the man's head up and back. He seemed to hang there, poised, with knees sagging. Then Barney struck viciously again and Wolfe went down.

Barney's hand went out and closed over his gun lying on the bar. A man behind him seized his wrist with strong fingers. "Keep it clean, Bogard," he warned. Barney wrenched his arm loose, swung it swiftly to rake the gun across the man's face. Whirling to stare at the circle of men about him, he said, "No more interference!" While they stood mute he bent down, grasped Wolfe's collar and backed out of the saloon. Once out on the walk he yanked the man erect and pushed him ahead, aiming for the crowd that had collected farther on.

Pauline Pringle appeared, pushing her way through the men toward Barney. She stared at his bloody face and then at Walt Wolfe, whose eyes were rolling. She had seen Barney make his run from the car in the street toward the stack of hay; after that she hadn't known what happened.

"You can tell him what's on your mind," said Barney as he shook Wolfe to clear the man's head.

"You're all through on the mesa, Walt," she said clearly. "You came to me broke and asking for help. I helped you make a start and, as payment, you've double-crossed me. The lease is canceled and you've got just next week to clear out."

As she finished speaking Buff Jones barged through the crowd and came to a halt before them. "What's this?" he demanded, letting his small eyes flit about the trio. "Who was shootin' a while ago? Who's been fightin'?"

"You can't be as dumb as you look," said Barney. "You know damned well what happened, what was hatched up for me. Brother, you're playing with the wrong string this time. The next time you call up the Pringle ranch and ask me to come to town you'd better make it good."

"You're blabbin' drunk," blustered Jones. "I'm arrestin' you for—"

"Nuts!" snapped Barney and hurled Wolfe at the sheriff. "Take this skunk out of my sight before I really lose my temper." He laid his hand on Pauline's arm and led her across the street. "If you've any shopping to do you'd better get at it."

"The other man, Barney?"

"Got away," bitterly. "I spoiled his gun and he ran like a rabbit. I didn't even get a good look at him."

On the opposite walk Pauline drew up and stared haughtily at those in the street. "I don't propose to hurry for any of these yokels," she declared. "They don't like me a bit, and I hate them."

"Silly talk," he told her. "You could be friends with these neighbors if you would. They're just ranchers trying to make a living. You don't ask them to your place or visit them. Instead, you have your picture friends come to enjoy that castle up yonder. What else can you expect from these folks around here?"

"Barney Bogard, you can't talk to me this way."

"Oh, come down off your high horse!" he cried.

She stood stiff and erect, head high and eyes blazing. "I think that you'd better stay here in town with these—these friends of yours."

"I have no real friends here; they associate me with you. Besides, I'm here to get Little John's killer, and I won't leave until I do."

Her lips relaxed and the fire died in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Barney. Let's go and find Kaye; your wounds need dressing."

"We'll get what's needed and then leave," he said firmly.

CHAPTER VIII

"It's Not a Ghost"

BY THE time they had reached the base of the mesa Barney had cooled off somewhat. He was still bitter because he had turned in the wrong direction from the haystack, but he was not impelled to talk roughly to Pauline as he had there on the sidewalk in town. That had been one of the few occasions in his life when his tongue got beyond control. The moon was edging up in the east and he pulled an object from his pocket.

"Here, Pauline, is the reason you heard no shot the day Little John was killed. It's the silencer the gulcher had on his gun. I shot it off at the stack of hay."

"It's also the reason you heard no shot the day you and Tess were riding the mesa and that slug clipped your hat. Oh, I coaxed it out of Tess after I noticed your hat."

"Well, yes." He turned the silencer over in his fingers. "The more I think of it the more I'm positive the gent hid in the hay while I ran around the stack. After I started up behind the stores he made a run for the barn, got a horse and hit the grit. Maybe I was foolish in letting Walt Wolfe go. Maybe I should have held him, beat the truth out of him, for he and the killer are pards. I'm sure of that now."

"And Buff Jones is mixed up in it," she vowed.

"Of course; a minor partner. He probably knows where your stock has been going, been getting a cut out of it. Why, he hasn't even made a bluff at investigating the rustling."

"Barney, I know you've hinted differently, but I'm wondering if Walt Wolfe hasn't been mixed up with some local outlaw, some man that thinks my place is easy prey."

He shook his head. "I'm convinced that this thing goes further back than any local man. Somewhere back along the line you've made an enemy, a bitter enemy, Pauline. It might even have occurred in your picture days. He's come here to make life miserable for you. He met up with Wolfe, another old picture man, and they joined forces."

"But I've been more than fair with Wolfe, and I don't know of a man I met in the old days that isn't my friend. It's ridiculous." She gave a short, mirthless laugh. "The Perils of Pauline!"

It was ten o'clock when they drove into the crescent-shaped court. The moon was silvering the glass dome above them; an angular shadow ran out from the wide porch. As they got out of the car Teresa came to meet them, and saw the crust of blood on Barney's face.

"You've been hurt!" she cried with a concern that tightened her mother's lips.

"Oh, just a couple of cuts from flying glass, Tess."

"You come right in and let me tend to them."

He submitted to her ministrations, seated on the couch while she washed the cuts, put gauze over them and then some strips of tape. "I'm going along the next time," she declared.

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" snapped her mother.

"But what happened down in Brewster?"

Pauline Pringle did not reply. She tipped her head on one side as though listening, and then walked to the front door. As she stood there, Teresa laid a hand on Barney's arm and bent forward to gaze into his eyes. "You tell me," she whispered.

"A fella took a couple of shots at me, that's all."

"That's all!" she echoed. "The same man, Barney?"

"I reckon so, Tess."

"He's coming closer all the time," she said anxiously. "Barney, I don't want it to happen. I couldn't bear to see you lying on a bed dying like—like Little John."

There was but a short distance between their faces and Barney closed the gap quickly to brush his lips across hers. "That won't happen to me," he said softly.

"Barney!" called Pauline Pringle tensely. He jerked erect and stared toward the door. "I've a feeling that something is wrong out there. I believe the cottage door where you put Tony is open."

He crossed to her, pushed her aside. "Stay right here, both of you," he commanded. Gliding along the edge of the porch, he reached a position opposite the cottage and paused. George Laylord wasn't in sight. The foreman might have gone inside to talk with Tony, but if so why was there not the sound of his voice?

Barney trotted across the court and laid a boot on the cottage step. From the dark interior came a faint groan. With a bound he was inside, and saw stretched out on the floor the tall form of the foreman. He went forward to kneel beside him. The rustle of his chaps had not subsided when there was another sound, this time behind him. He spun on his knees and threw up an arm, but too late. A chair was descending on his head; it crashed through his defense and smacked against his head. The whole universe exploded at that instant, opening a deep pit of blackness toward which he seemed to be falling. He fought that fall, that blackness with all his strength, but in vain. Before it enveloped him he seemed to hear a scream far away.

It was half an hour later that a merciless pounding against his brain forced him to roll over and struggle to his knees. He seized his head with both hands and pressed tightly. Slowly the strip of moonlight on the floor ceased its gyrations; he stared about. What had happened? Oh, yes; Laylord on the floor. But the foreman was now gone. Tony! There was the answer. The kid had tricked him, possibly tricked Laylord. What a fool he'd been to barge inside the cottage without checking the situation. He staggered to his feet, stumbled outside and made for the big trough near the corral. Reaching it, he plunged his head into the water.

His head was soggy, dripping, but his brain was clearer as he went up the steps of the big porch and entered the house. Again he saw a form stretched out on the floor. Laylord was bending over Pauline Pringle who had an ugly bruise on her forehead. Barney joined the foreman, noticing a clot of blood at the back of his head.

"It's come," said Laylord huskily. "I thought at first that I was seeing a ghost, but now I know it's true. It was him."

"You don't mean Tony?"

"No. I mean Julian Patullo. I was sitting there on the steps and never heard a sound; then, all of a sudden, he was right there before me with that ugly smirk on his mouth. Before I could utter a word he bashed me with the butt of a rifle he was carrying."

"Patulla is Pauline's first husband?"

"As I told you. He swore when she cut him loose that he'd get even with her some day. He's been years getting around to it."

"But you told me he'd been killed in South America."

"That's what we heard, but it seems

the rumor was wrong. Damn his black heart."

"Help me get Pauline to the couch." Barney was recalling the scream he'd heard just before losing out to the black pit of darkness. With Pauline on the couch he stared about the room. There were signs that a brief but terrific struggle had taken place. "Where's Teresa?" he asked.

A bleak expression fixed Laylord's face. "I don't know. She wasn't here when I reached the house. I hope she wasn't crazy enough to take after Patullo or Tony. I reckon Patullo turned the kid loose. He must have, for I found myself inside the cottage when I came to."

An icy sensation tightened Barney's chest. Tess might have tried to catch Tony, or even Patullo, but he didn't think so. It was something worse than that. His mind flicked back to Little John's last words: "Look out for the Kid." And he had tried to say Julian. Barney had thought the old sheriff meant Jug or Jud. Julian Patullo! Pauline's first husband.

Pauline Pringle opened her eyes at that instant and stared at the high, glass dome above. Then, as realization came to her, she sat up, grasped at the back of the couch and swayed. Her face went dead white. "Julian!" she groaned. "It was Julian! Not dead, not dead. He—he took Tess, my little Tess. He said he would."

"Steady, Pauline," said Laylord.

She stared wildly at the two men near her. "Where were you?" she cried. "You let him do it, come here to the house and—" She folded forward, head in hands. Her shoulders began to jerk with harsh sobs. Barney held back, knowing that this torrent of emotion must have its sway. Presently she steadied, looked up, and her amber eyes were again flashing. "I'll kill him!" she cried. "With my bare hands I'll kill him. The dirty beast stole my baby!"

"We'll get him," Barney assured her. "You'll get him? Where were you when I was fighting him? You who Tess called a hawk! Why you—you—" She choked and threw her hands wide in a gesture of disdain.

Barney stared down at her and felt no resentment. "I'll be going now," he said calmly.

"Yes, running out on me!"

"Going after Patullo," he corrected.

HE HAD his saddle on the gelding when they joined him at the barn. Laylord threw a saddle on Zulu and rigged another horse for himself. "We're riding with you," explained the foreman.

Barney said nothing at the moment. He was thinking of the man who had taken Tess from the ranch, the man who used a silencer on his gun. What would he be doing with her? How would he treat her? A man who nursed revenge over such a long period of years, a man who struck like a snake would stop at nothing. Barney's lips had touched Tess's and he'd looked into her eyes to see something that hinted of a future of which any man might dream. As they rode with him out of the court they had no way of knowing what he felt. Within him was a fire that, in comparison, made Pauline's wild passion seem like a tiny flame.

"Ride to the mesa valley and gather up the boys," he said to Laylord presently. "Take them into the breaks north of the mesa. If any of you catch one glimpse of a rider down there follow him and send a man to Wolfe's place for me. Don't try to close in. Remember, Tess is there."

Laylord nodded and swung off toward the valley. Pauline kept at Barney's side. She said nothing, respecting the cold set of his features and, perhaps, regretting her hasty words at the house. Most certainly his demeanor at present resembled that of a hawk in search of prey. A man hunter, and, she thought, also a girl hunter.

Walt Wolfe's place was dark and silent when they rode up. Barney motioned for her to remain on Zulu. He

dismounted and went inside, and was gone many dragging minutes. She could hear doors opening and the thud of his boots as he prowled about. He was taking chances that ordinary precaution forbade, which was some indication of his state of mind.

"Nothing there," he reported. "I hardly expected Patullo to wait here for us. He'd figure this the first place we'd come to."

"He's tricky, Barney. He might leave Tess hidden here and go on, planning to come back later."

"A good thought," he admitted. "But if Tess isn't hidden in the house, where? You know this place."

"Not the barn; not the grove. Oh, I can't think where!"

"Is there a cellar under the house?"

"No; when we lived here we had just a root cellar out back."

"We'll have a look. Lead me to it."

The moon, filtering down through the trees at the south side of the house, revealed some steps leading down into the darkness of the old cellar. Barney knelt down and examined those steps. The dirt had been caved off recently, by dragging boot heels.

"Something has happened here tonight," he told Pauline. "One, possibly two people have come down these steps."

"Oh, Barney! Go on down to the door."

He descended the steps to halt before a heavy wooden door. It was closed, the hasp down in an iron throat extending from the door-frame. A huge padlock was snapped into place. Barney lifted a fist and rapped sharply on the door. Ten seconds passed, then, through the door, came the muffled sound of a groan.

"Barney! She's there, she's there! Break down the door."

Barney seized the padlock, peered at it in the gloom. Then he dashed up the steps and ran toward the house. At the door, near a chopping block, was an ax. He came back with it and, with one swift blow, sheered the padlock from the hasp. Placing his shoulder against the door, he gave a shove. Pauline's quick breath was on his neck as the door swung inward.

CHAPTER IX

Spawn of the Devil

THE old cellar was dank, musty, and wholly dark. Barney stood sidewise in the entrance, left hand pressed back against Pauline, right gripping his gun. "Tess?" she said, her voice breaking slightly with the strain.

Again that faint moan. "A man," said Barney and reached for a match. He raked it across his chaps and held it out. As the flame wavered he saw lying almost at his feet the limp from of Tony Patterson. The left side of the boy's face was covered with blood from a cut over his temple. The left eye was badly swollen.

"Patullo again!" muttered Barney. "But why strike Tony?" He swung the dying match in an arc and saw no other person in the cellar. "We'll get him out of here," he said.

"Why?" snapped Pauline. "We owe him nothing. It's Tess we're hunting."

"Don't be foolish," said Barney, bending down to get his arms under the limp form. "Tony can tell us things."

He carried Tony not to the house but to the barn, had Pauline fashion a bed of hay near the door and fetch some water from the well. A quick examination revealed no other wounds but a skinned hand, and Barney guessed that the boy had tried to defend himself. But why had Patullo made the attack? Because Tony had protested against some treatment of Tess?

They bathed his forehead with cold water, slapped it on his neck and wrists. But it was all of half an hour before Tony showed any signs of coming to. Julian Patullo's rifle was of no use when it came to shooting, but he had

certainly wielded the butt of it with telling effect.

"Don't!" was Tony's first word. "Don't do it, please."

"Patullo isn't here, Tony," soothed Barney. "It's me. Bogard."

"Bogard? Bogard!"

"Steady, now. Take it easy." He pressed Tony back to the hay. "Why did Patullo hit you?"

Tony Patterson's face screwed up as though he were going to burst out crying. Barney held a cup of water to his lips and made him drink. "Take it easy," he repeated.

"You treat him like a long lost brother!" cried Pauline.

Barney paid no attention to her. "All right, Tony; speak up. Why did Patullo hit you?"

"Because I didn't kill you when I had the chance." Tony gulped more water. "There in the cottage at the ranch. He knocked out Laylord and then opened the door and freed me. I was to wait there until you and Pauline came home. If you came down to see why the door was open I was to knock you over and then kill you. He was waiting behind the big house to grab Tess."

"We got there soon after he did, eh?"

"Yes; right away. When we got here with Tess he found out I hadn't bashed your head in and turned on me. He's got an awful temper. It ain't the first time he's beat me up."

"Why didn't you kill me, Tony?"

"Because you had a chance to make it tough for me, and didn't. You caught me but you didn't smash me around or give me the third degree. Besides, I didn't like the way he'd planned to get Tess." Tony's good eye opened and the moonlight revealed its gleam. "I'll kill him if I ever get the chance. I don't care if he is my father."

"You're father! Julian Patullo is your father?"

"Yes. He was married before he met Miss Pauline."

Barney looked at Pauline inquiringly. "I knew he had been married," she said, "but I didn't know there was a child." She bent down to peer closely at Tony Patullo's face, and shook her head. "I don't see much resemblance. A little, perhaps, but not much. I would never have guessed it."

"You wouldn't but Little John Cope did," said Barney. "Little John had more perception, more keen instinct than any man in the law business. I understand it now. You were having trouble with rustlers and Little John just couldn't see any of the neighbors doing it. He may not have suspected Walt Wolfe, either. But he did see something of Julian Patullo in Tony Patterson; just a trace, enough to make him suspicious. After he had been shot he was more suspicious, enough to try and warn us."

Listening to Barney make the shrewd summary and hating his father as he did, Tony opened up with confirming information. It had all been planned in advance. Tony was to get a job with Pauline and try to win Teresa. By Tony's marrying her his father intended to get control of the ranch. In the meantime Patullo himself would do everything possible to harass Pauline, until she was in such a state of mind she would be willing to submit to any sort of a proposition. Patullo hated her for ditching him; for having saved money and acquired a big ranch while he went penniless. It was revenge and greed well mixed.

"It was going all right until Cope came here," finished Tony. "Dad was afraid of Little John. He was afraid that he'd discover the trail, how the cattle were disappearing. And he was afraid that Little John would recognize me as a relative. . . . That's all. You can do what you like with me. I'm sick of this business."

"Walt Wolfe is in with your father, of course."

"Yes, Dad talked him into it. It wasn't much of a job, either."

"Where is Tess?"

"I don't know, Bogard. They didn't

even tell me what they planned to do with her except hold her until Miss Pauline came to terms. I think they knew I really love her."

"You—love her!" cried Pauline in disgust.

Barney stared at the boy and decided that he had got what honesty he had from his mother, whoever she may have been. He had his father's hot blood and temper; could be treacherous if occasion required. But Barney was sure that just now Tony Patullo was telling the truth.

"What about Buff Jones?" asked Barney, putting a last question. "Is he in on this too?"

"I don't know anything about Jones except that he's friendly with Wolfe. I supposed that was why the sheriff never came to see about the rustling."

Pauline Pringle began pacing up and down. "We're wasting time," she fretted. "And what are we going to do now with this—this spawn of Patullo's?"

"Would you let me help hunt for Tess?" asked Tony. "I'll ride night and day, do anything I can. And if I meet up with him—"

"That's asking a lot, Tony, after what you've done. You can't expect us to trust you now."

Barney wondered what he should do with the boy. Certainly it would be foolish to turn him over to Buff Jones. And suddenly an idea struck him. "Tony," he said, "you say you want to help. Well, here's a way you can. We found you locked in the old root cellar back of the house. While there's nothing human in that father of yours, it's possible he may come back for you. Are you willing to go back into the cellar and wait, be a decoy?"

"If you'll give me a gun," agreed Tony.

"No, I won't go that far. But I think it's a good idea. Head for the cellar."

Tony didn't protest too much as Barney closed the door on him and hooked the bent padlock through the hasp; apparently he felt safe with Barney waiting outside for Julian Patullo to return.

"You're going to remain here?" asked Pauline anxiously.

Barney shook his head. "Patullo won't get back here tonight; he's too busy making off with Tess. I figure he'll watch for a chance to come back tomorrow or tomorrow night. His conscience won't bother him about Tony. Right now I want to hit any trail I can find."

As he finished speaking he heard a horse approaching from the north, through the trees behind the barn. Trotting forward to the house, he took up a stand where he could watch the rider come into the yard. It was George Laylord, looking drawn and tired. He rode along with one hand held at the back of his head. When he saw Barney and Pauline near the house he kicked his horse forward and his tired face lifted with an expression of excitement.

"We found a place north of here, in the breaks where a man has been hiding out," he announced. "There was no one there when we arrived and I couldn't read any fresh trail. I told the boys to stay right there until I brought you down."

"O.K., George. I think I know the place. That's where Tess and I caught up Zulu the time Tony tried to run off with the stud. Let's go!"

North of the barn a saddled horse was feeding, Tony's pinto. This indicated that Patullo wanted to travel fast, not be bothered with a spare horse. The three of them loped past the pasture and came to the draw that let down from the mesa rim. Zulu seemed to sense that he was coming to the place where he had almost gained his freedom, and Pauline had to check him sharply.

The five Pringle riders were waiting above the ledge of overhanging rock. Barney nodded to them and felt that they were not up to any such emergency; that he couldn't count on them for very much. He went on along the

draw, conscious that they were watching his movements. Perhaps Teresa had told them, also, that he was a hawk, and they were waiting for him to do something swift and startling.

He saw the marks of his struggle with Zulu, and the small tracks of Tony's pinto leading off across the ridges. But this was all old sign. Making a quick circle, he saw nothing to indicate that a rider or riders had passed around the ledge. He returned to the waiting group.

"Patullo never came this way," he announced. "We do know that he stopped at Wolfe's place, so we'd better go back there and start off right."

"But Patullo has been staying down here?" said Pauline.

"Someone has," he admitted and urged the gelding to a lope.

Barney noticed it but she also spoke of it as they rode past the pasture. Tony's pinto was no longer there. With a feeling that he had slipped up somewhere Barney crossed the yard and went directly to the cellar. There was a fresh mound of earth on the west side of it and a broken shovel lying nearby. Barney snapped his fingers at his own carelessness; that broken shovel must have been left in the cellar and Tony had used it to burrow a hole up through the soft dirt below the edge of the sod roof.

"Gone!" exclaimed Pauline. "Went to join his father. He lied to us, Barney."

Barney shook his head. "He didn't lie to us. If he knew where Patullo was headed for he'd have told us. No, Tony is on the prod, gone to do some hunting for himself."

"He knows all the plans," she insisted.

Barney's head was thumping painfully and he didn't feel like arguing with her. He said, "All right, supposing you try to follow him then. I'll try and pick up a real trail."

She didn't take the suggestion but rode with him as he went off toward the south where the trees opened up to the bare mesa. Here again he studied the ground. There were a number of fresh tracks coming in and going out, but they were so confusing that he could not make sure which ones had been made by the horses of Patullo and Tess. He did ascertain that Tony's pinto had turned westward across the mesa; it appeared that the boy was most probably headed for the home ranch.

"Spread out," he told those who followed him. "Make a wide circle and see if you can find the tracks of two horses headed in a definite direction. One will be shod with round corks."

They obeyed him at once. Barney sat his horse and stared ahead, lost in deep thought. He was trying to reason just what he would do if he were in Patullo's place.

"Barney, could he be making for the railroad?" asked Pauline. He shook his head. "But he knows this country'll be combed for him, that his only chance is to get clear away with Tess. Isn't it possible?"

"How could a man take a girl prisoner off on a train?" he asked. "Especially a girl like Tess! They'd be noticed the first thing. No, he's not headed for the railroad. He don't want to get that far away. How could he do business with you in that case? Patullo wants this ranch or a part of it. Either that or he intends to make you pay heavy for the return of Tess. I'll bet he's got a mighty good hide-out within a twenty-mile radius of this very spot. It's up to me to find it."

Pauline Pringle sagged in the saddle. The soft light of the moon did not hide the lines of grief and age that had come to her face.

"Barney," she said, "I've got to depend on you. You're the only one I can count on now. No matter what it costs me, no matter the price, promise me you'll find Tess."

"I'll find her," he said grimly, "and the cost to you won't be as much as you're making yourself believe, Pauline."

CHAPTER X

Ransom

WHEN Pauline's men came back to them after a futile search about that section of the mesa, Barney had reached a decision for the moment. The moon was partly obscured by drifting clouds and they were all tired. He told them all to go back to the ranch and get some rest, then rejoin him at Wolfe's place about noon.

Pauline refused. "I can't go back there!" she cried. "Not when Tess isn't there. Let me stay here with you, Barney."

He would have much rather been alone to think and rest, but he could not refuse the agony in her face. "All right," he agreed. To Laylord he said, "Check up on the guns at the ranch. I wouldn't be surprised if Tony Patterson went there for a weapon."

When they were alone Pauline said, "Maybe Julian will come back before morning. I hope so!"

"He might, unless he sees Tony barging about somewhere. Just to be ready in case that happens, you and I will split the watch. You take the first part. Wake me up after daylight and I'll take on from there."

Barney had little hope of concealing the two white horses from such a wily man as Julian Patullo, so he simply put them in the barn. He went to the bedroom in the house, closed the door and lay down on Wolfe's bed. In the kitchen Pauline Pringle paced up and down like some caged animal, her hand resting upon the pearl butt of the six-gun she had carried through all her years of movie work.

The sun, shining through a window, wakened Barney. He felt refreshed and clearer in mind. There was no sound in the kitchen, and when he opened the intervening door he saw Pauline Pringle seated in a chair near the outside door, gun propped across her knees and head bent forward. She was sound asleep with the morning light revealing new strands of white in her tawny hair. Barney stood there observing her until he caught the faint thud of approaching hoofs. Gliding forward, he seized her shoulders and lifted her out of the chair.

"Someone coming," he whispered in her ear.

"I've—I've been asleep!" she murmured.

"That's all right. Hold your place here." He slipped out the door and peered around a corner of the house. "Laylord and the boys," he called to her. "Getting here before noon. Something must have happened."

Laylord greeted them gravely and said, "I found the gun case in the house open, Pauline. Little John's gun had been taken. And I also found this note pinned on the couch. Somebody left it there while we were all gone." He handed it to her.

"From Julian!" she exclaimed.

"He works fast," said Barney. "What's the demand?"

"Fifty thousand dollars. Barney, I haven't that much money. I couldn't get it without selling the ranch."

"Does he ask for a reply, say how to let him know?"

She shook her head. "That's all it says."

"Just a preliminary skirmish, something to work on your nerves. Don't pay any attention to it or let it worry you."

"But I've got to do something! Maybe I could arrange a mortgage. Oh, I want Tess back!"

"Have you forgotten me or the rest of your friends here?" he inquired mildly.

The question checked her plunge into despair; her head came up and some of the old fire filled her eyes. "I guess it was hearing from him that sapped me for the moment. The note means he's still somewhere about."

"Sure; don't think he's going to

leave this soon. He's planned all this too well."

"But the note—how did it get inside the house? Oh, of course; Tony put it there!"

"No," checked Barney. "If he's had a note, he'd have left it here for us." He turned to Laylord. "We've been searching the wrong part of the country," he said. "Patullo was here, we know that, but he figured we'd come here to make the hunt. So he's doubled back to the west. I'll bet we'll find tracks below the mesa rim leading in that direction. You men must have crossed them last night while riding into the north breaks."

"It's awful rough country to the west of the mesa," said Laylord. "A horse can go just so far, and that's all."

"We'll have a look at it," said Barney. He secured the horses from the barn and they mounted. Leading the way through the grove of trees, he came out into that country below the north rim where he had chased Patullo the time the man had shot at him. Cruising along, working up and down the slope, he finally found what he sought — comparatively fresh tracks headed westward.

"Only one horse," he announced after getting down to examine the tracks closely. "One horse carrying double. You can tell by the way the prints are made; deeper at the toes."

"I forgot to say that we picked up a loose saddled horse on the way into the ranch last night," spoke up Laylord. "One of ours."

Barney looked at him so steadily that the foreman flushed under his coat of tan. "You were more excited about the note than you were about the horse," said Barney evenly.

"I guess so; yes."

Barney said nothing more but resumed the trail, following it as it climbed up to pass the northwest corner of the mesa rim. Here he paused to watch the approach of some riders coming northward from the ranch. There were four in the party, and he recognized Walt Wolfe out in front.

"Here comes something else," Barney told those behind him. "Be ready for anything, but leave Wolfe to me."

"He's bringing help to get his stock off the mesa," surmised Pauline.

"Maybe," agreed Barney. "But I seem to recognize one of those men with him. Yes, it's the fellow who grabbed my arm in the saloon after I'd knocked Wolfe down."

"That's Tim Clancy of the T Bar," said Laylord. "Owns a ranch south of Brewster."

The hostile attitude of the visitors could not be mistaken as they drew up to face the Pringle riders. Wolfe's face showed the marks of Barney's fists; his eyes held a sardonic and bitter expression. Clancy, too, bore the marks of Barney's gun where it had raked across his face.

"We want no trouble with you, Miz Pauline," said Wolfe, breaking a pregnant silence. "We're after Bogard. No man can batter me or rake my friends and get away with it."

"You seem to have brought plenty of help," she said tartly. "You'd better use your friends to help you clear out of here."

"Later," he assented. "But first we got a chore to do."

"For Julian Patullo?" asked Barney who had been edging his horse into a better position, one that would not put those behind him in danger.

"Patullo? I don't know nothin' about him."

"But you'd like to put me out of the way to make things easier for him. All right; make your play, Wolfe. Clancy can be next if he so desires."

Clancy sent an inquiring glance at Wolfe. "Who's Patullo?" he asked. "Where does he come into this?"

Wolfe did not take his eyes from Barney but waved a hand. "I don't know what he's talkin' about, Tim. The only Patullo I ever knew is dead—like Bogard's going to be in a minute."

"Kind of off your stride, ain't you?" suggested Barney. Then he addressed

himself to Clancy. "Patullo is a dirty snake, a pard of Wolfe's who has kidnaped Teresa Devore and demanded fifty thousand dollars for her return."

"Wait a minute!" cried Clancy. "I don't get this. Is that right, ma'am?"

"It is, Mr. Clancy. We're hunting for Patullo, who stole my daughter from the ranch. He's an old enemy of mine."

"You goin' to listen to this palaver?" growled Wolfe.

"He's the man," went on Barney, "who tried to drygulch me in Brewster the other evening. Shot at me with a rifle equipped with a silencer. He's the man who killed John Cope at this very spot. He's the friend and partner of Wolfe. So you see, Clancy, you're traveling in bad company."

Clancy said, "I don't go for kidnaping or silencers on guns. You didn't mention any of this to me, Wolfe. You asked me to help you move your stock and maybe get a chance to square things with Bogard."

"But I don't know nothin' about silencers or this kidnaping they mention. Are you goin' to believe me or the man who gun-raked you?"

Clancy didn't ponder the question very long. "I reckon I'll take Bogard's word for things."

"Fool!" bawled Wolfe, starting to wave a hand in protest.

Barney was watching for such a movement which might very well end up with a drawn gun. So, when at the end of the gesture Wolfe's hand swept over the gun butt at his hip, Barney snatched his own weapon and fired twice across the neck of his horse. The first shot smashed Wolfe's arm above the elbow and the second bored high into the opposite shoulder. They rocked the man back in the saddle where he swayed like a tree in a high wind and would have fallen had he not clamped his legs tight around the belly of his horse.

"Gawd!" husked a Clancy man, eyes wide upon Barney. "I never even saw him draw."

Clancy was watching Wolfe and nodded to another man to close in and lend support. By this time Wolfe's face was a grayish green.

"How about it, Mr. Clancy?" asked Barney politely.

"I wanted none of it," said Clancy. "You and I are square."

"Then put me in your debt and get Wolfe to town. Have Doc Kaye tend to him, hold him. I'll be in a little later to ask some questions."

"I'll do that." Clancy nodded to the man supporting Wolfe, who got on behind the wounded man and held him steady. The party turned about and headed the way they had come.

Barney led his party on across the corner of the mesa and down the other side, his eyes still following the trail. For half an hour not a word was spoken. Laylord and the other men were too astounded by the sudden termination of the affair to say anything at all. They simply did not understand how Barney had drawn his gun and shot Wolfe twice before the other's gun was completely free of the holster.

It was Pauline who broke the silence. "It might have been better to ask Wolfe questions back there instead of waiting," she said.

"He was too sick, too much shocked. I can put pressure on him later if need be. Right now I want to follow this trail."

That trail led down and down, to the base of the mesa and on out onto the west flats. Here it angled into the northwest, the country Laylord had said was impossible. The flat seemed to break suddenly into a vast field of ginger-colored rock, up-ended and sharp. There was a noticeable increase of temperature and sun glinted from a million facets.

Barney was wondering if Patullo had been fool enough to enter the field when he saw that the trail had vanished into a narrow avenue slanting off through the border of the rock. He dismounted and closely examined the flinty ground, and found not so much

as a scratch on it. He led his own gelding in the same way and saw that he left no tracks. If such was the case here, what would it be farther on where the floor was rock?

They waited more than an hour for him while he worked in and around that rocky avenue. He made his way deeper into the field, cruising along through the brown rock that resembled huge prunes standing on end. Looking from the top of the mesa, one would never have suspected such a formation. At last Barney came out to rejoin them, dripping wet with perspiration.

"A man couldn't last two hours in that place," he announced. "Not in the daytime, anyhow."

"But the trail led in here," said Pauline anxiously. "Patullo took Tess in."

Barney shook his head. "I doubt that. What Patullo wanted, if we followed the trail, was to have us go in there and cook. He's too damned smart to go in there himself, at least very far. Somewhere around here his trail will show again, unless he sprouted wings and flew out. We'll wait until it's cooler."

"Wait!" cried Pauline. "Always delay of some kind. Oh, I wish Little John was here!"

Barney's head jerked back as though he had been struck. But his voice was cool and steady as he said, "And so do I, Pauline. You couldn't wish that half as much as I do."

She reached out to lay a hand on his damp sleeve. "I'm sorry, Barney. I shouldn't have said that. The rest of us have just followed you around, accomplished nothing at all. We've no right to complain."

"We'll be going back to the ranch," he said and mounted the gelding. He felt sorry for Pauline whose high cheek bones were showing sharper with each passing hour. There were dark circles under her eyes, eyes that did not flash very frequently now but held an expression of fear.

Two men waited in the court as they rode up to the ranch. They were Clancy and one of his riders. Barney wondered why they had come back from town. He glanced at their horses and decided that they had never ridden to town at all.

"Bogard," said the T Bar man, "if you planned to use Wolfe I reckon you're out of luck. He's dead."

Barney's lips thinned as he asked, "How come?"

"Damned if I know. We were drifting along and my man was holding him in the saddle when he suddenly slumped back. He'd been pretty sick, of course."

"Any other wound? I mean somebody didn't slam another slug into him?"

"Nope. The only thing I can figure is that a bloodclot got into his heart. Bingo! He's gone, just like that."

"Another error for me," muttered Barney. "I should have made him talk back there on the mesa."

Tim Clancy fumbled with his hat, looked at Barney and then at Pauline. He cleared his throat. "Folks," he began, "us ranchers hereabouts have sort of formed an opinion about this layout up here, and it ain't been favorable. We've wanted no part of you whatever. But there's one thing we don't go for in this country, and that's kidnaping. Ma'am," to Pauline, "I'd be right proud if you'd let me help you find this here Patullo gent."

"Thank you, Tim Clancy," and her lips formed a quivered smile.

CHAPTER XI

The Hawk Closes In

TO PAULINE and Laylord it was a strange sight that took place between then and sunset. By two's and three's men came to the ranch, watered their horses at the big trough and stood about. Some of them were rather embarrassed and few spoke, but

their presence could not be mistaken. These ranchers and their help had come to join in the hunt for Julian Patullo.

"I can't believe it!" declared Pauline to Barney.

"It's easy to understand," he said. "If you'd been friends with your neighbors of the flats this thing would never have occurred. Patullo saw that you were alone, had no friends you could rely on; it looked easy to him."

"Why, there's Sheriff Jones coming in," she said and pointed.

Buff Jones could not, with good policy, allow the voters of the county to gather and aid in the search of a kidnaper without taking some part in it himself. He hated hard rides; the saddle galled his fat legs and shook up his fat belly.

Barney went out to meet him.

"You should of reported this thing to me at once," said Jones, wiping sweat from his face. "We don't go for kidnaping in this country."

Barney lifted a hand and pointed southward across the mesa. "Get the hell out of here!" he ordered.

"Huh? Say, I'm the sheriff."

"I said get out! When we want fat hogs around here we'll raise 'em."

"You're mighty high-handed, seems to me. There's other things we don't like besides kidnapers. I'm the law, and—"

"I'm not telling you again," said Barney coldly.

The small eyes beneath the folds of flesh shifted uneasily. They saw men standing about and watching the encounter, but there was no indication of help or friendliness in those men. He tried to square his shoulders defiantly but felt their weight instead. With just a brief nod he turned his horse and rode out of the court.

Barney returned to Pauline. "Order the cook to get up a big meal," he said. "Enough food to fill all these men here. They're going to ride afterward, and it's apt to be a long and hard journey. Make it a good meal, Pauline. These men will be your friends if you'll let them."

At sunset Barney called the men to the porch and briefly explained the situation up to date. The trail led into the edge of the brown rocks beyond the flats to the west, but he didn't believe that Patullo had gone into the inferno very far. It was meant to throw off any possible pursuit. But somewhere that trail came out again, and that was what they must find.

"What's this Patullo gent look like?" asked a man.

"I've never had a close look at him, friend. I only know that he's tall and dark, about fifty years old. Incidently, he's got a son running loose around this country. You may have heard of him as Tony Patterson. Pick the kid up if you run into him, but don't harm him. Now I wish that five or six of you would cross the mesa to the north and go on into the breaks up there. Watch out for the trail of a horse carrying double. It may be bending back to the east. The rest of you will ride with me."

There was no question as to his leadership, no question as to his policy. The Clancy men who had taken Wolfe into town had told the story of the mesa encounter; it had traveled fast and established sure respect for the man called Bogard. They followed him now, and the tawny-haired woman who rode at his side, down off the mesa and toward the field of brown rock. Arriving there, he divided the force and told them to search along the rim and through all the cuts near it for some mark of a passing horse.

"You'll stay with me, Pauline," he said. "The moon will be later getting up and it won't be as bright tonight. A person could get lost in here mighty easily."

"Not if they look around until they see the glass dome of the house back up on the mesa, Barney."

"That's an idea," he admitted. "But I wouldn't play up the big house or the glass dome before any of these men."

The brown rock swallowed them all, encompassed the whole crew in that forbidding silence. It was still very warm in there but the glare was gone. When the moon rose it sent a soft light across the field and made grotesque shadows beyond the interminable cones. Barney and Pauline worked slowly southward, bending out now and then to examine the softer ground of the flats.

It was during one of these side issues that he saw a strange mark on the ground, as though some coarse cloth had been pressed into the earth. There were several of these marks, which resembled more than anything else the ground nest of some large bird. He left Pauline there and went back to the rock and located Laylord. "Take charge here, George," he said. "If the men start coming out, collect them and head around to the north."

"You've found something, Barney?"

"I'm not sure; at least not sure enough to call the men out of the rocks."

Rejoining Pauline, he spent another five minutes examining the strange marks on the ground. They seemed to have a certain regularity, a line of progress, which erased the bird-nest idea. Squatted there, he thought hard while Pauline waited, on Zulu. And at last he snapped his fingers.

"Got it! A horse has passed this way with hoofs wrapped in cloth, probably gunny sacking."

Pauline watched him gather up the reins of the gelding and go forward, head bent and eyes searching the ground. A hawk? Yes, she knew of no other name for him at the moment. Certainly he had the eyes, swiftness and keen perception of a hawk.

He was almost to the base of the mesa when he halted. The wide, blotty tracks disappeared and in their place were the sharp marks of a horse's hoofs. The sacking had been removed at this spot. "Patullo is either crazy or the smartest gent I ever bucked up against," he muttered.

"It's him?" she cried eagerly.

"I think so. But these plain tracks head right up the mesa toward the ranch! Did he have the nerve to bring Tess back there?"

"Barney! You don't think—it isn't possible that he's hidden her somewhere in our own house?"

His senses quickened at the possibility. He had long since learned that the best place to hide an object was in the most accessible and therefore most unexpected, spot. But he did not let all this urge him into too fast a pace. Mounting, he continued to keep an eye on the trail, never losing it until it vanished among the many tracks near the ranch.

"This accounts for the ransom note," he told her. "Patullo doubled back, saw that the place was deserted and pinned the note to the back of the couch."

"We'll hunt the house over," she exclaimed as new color bloomed in her face.

"Yes, but we've got to remember that we've found no extra horse here. He couldn't have taken his mount into the house, you know."

"And then there's the cook," she added. "He'd have noticed any unusual sounds about the house."

"Maybe and maybe not."

They spent the latter part of an hour going over the big house, searching in places that Pauline said she had not seen in months. It was considerable of a task and at the end her new-found hope was gone. She sat down upon the couch and buried her face in her hands. "Poor little Tess," she moaned.

Barney fought back an ache in his own breast. Patullo had proved himself a shrewd fiend. He had outwitted them all the way. He had come here to the ranch all right; but where had he gone then? Barney knew there was little chance of picking up the trail from the ranch unless he made long and tedious circles beyond the tracks of the neighboring ranchers who had arrived to lend a hand. Again he tried to put himself in Patullo's place, think what

he would do next if he were the man.

"He knows that he'll be picked up sooner or later if he stays here on the mesa, or even in the breaks on each side. So where would he go to be safe for the next few days? Not to Wolfe's; not to the rock ledge where he's been camping; not to the flats to the south where there are ranches. That eliminates the whole blasted country except —except Brewster! By the gods! Brewster! Come on, Pauline."

"It can't be!" she exclaimed as they rode swiftly off the mesa and into the town road. "He wouldn't dare take her there."

"Remember that he rode by night, Pauline. No one would see him come into town."

"But where could he put her, hide her?"

"He probably had arrangements made in advance. He might have rented an old house at the edge of town or—or—" He slammed one fist into the palm of the other hand. "Fool!" he cried. "What a fool I've been."

Pauline couldn't ask him what he meant, for he was spurring the gelding into a run. Zulu flattened his white ears and began to reach out with his long, strong legs. Bent slightly forward in the saddle, she could glimpse the side of Barney's face, and noted the set of his lips and jaws. Was the hawk closing in? She prayed that he was. Just to have Tess in her arms again, to rock her back and forth like a baby. Only Tess wasn't a baby any more. She was a woman now, and a woman belongs in a man's arms.

"I've got to face it," she told herself. "I've been foolish to fight it so blindly. And if it must be, I don't know of another man I'd rather see have her than Barney Bogard." She drew in a breath of the rushing air. "To think that I'll even admit it!"

It was past midnight when he threw up a hand and halted at the edge of town. "We'll leave the horses here," he told her. "The last thing in the world we want to do is give any warning. Take the south side of the street and go quietly."

The whole street was dark except for a light coming from the saloon. The south side was in the moon shadow, the north side softly touched with silver. They went forward at the edge of the walk, their boots falling in the cushion of dust, until they were but a short distance from the sheriff's office.

"You'll wait here," he whispered to her.

"Where are you going, Barney?"

"Jones' place—the office or the jail behind it."

"But why? Certainly you don't think—"

"Look back," he said. "See Jones all the way through. What has he done? Why has he kept back all the time? He's been getting a cut out of the sale of your beef; he's played ball with Wolfe, and Wolfe means Patullo. I know it sounds crazy to you, but I'd gamble my life that Tess was brought here to town and is hidden somewhere in that jail this minute. The place is so damned obvious, and yet it isn't. Who'd know about it? Who'd ever dream of it? That's what Patullo figured. And if I was put out of the way he thought there wasn't another man who would ever suspect it. That's why he sent Wolfe up to pick a fight with me. Yes, and Buff Jones was sweating something besides juice today when he came to the ranch to take charge of the hunt. He was plenty worried."

Pauline couldn't speak. She just stood there in the street with hands clenched tightly at her sides. Could Barney be right? Judged from his past performance, he was. She wet her lips. Julian in the jail with Tess! And then she sensed a sudden tenseness in Barney.

"I just saw somebody," he whispered. "Someone slipped along the side of the jail."

"Julian!"

"Yes, or some man he's set up to watch for him."

"Barney, he'll kill, you know that.

For heaven's sake, be careful. For my sake and—and Tess's."

"You mean that, Pauline?"

"Yes, Barney."

He ran his hands up and down his chaps to remove the moisture. "Stay right here," he said. "If the thing breaks wrong for me, try and get help at once."

Leaving her there with hands tightly clenched, he eased to the walk, removed his boots and then went on, keeping to the deeper shadows. The figure he had seen had come out from between two buildings and then darted toward the alley, following the jail wall. It was reasonable to expect the man to enter the rear door of the jail, perhaps wait there.

Barney made his choice at once and went on to the front door. He laid his hand on the knob and turned carefully. The door opened and he eased inside, hand resting on his gun. The air in there was foul with stale tobacco smoke and the odor of sweat. He closed the door behind him and took one step forward.

"Far enough!" proclaimed a thick voice, and Barney felt a gun against his breast bone. "Who's prowling into my jail?"

"Oh, Sheriff Jones," said Barney and felt better.

"Hold steady while I get a light goin'." Barney held his place, blinked slightly as the sheriff struck a match and put the flame to a lamp on his desk. He kept his gun trained on Barney. "All right, Bogard, what's the meanin' of this? If you've come for my help at last, why not be open about it?"

"I wasn't thinking to get any help from you, Jones. So far the Pringle ranch has had to do without your great service."

"I offered it today, didn't I? And you ordered me off the place. Now I'm orderin' you outa this jail."

"Sure, and I'll go just as soon as I get what I want."

"What you want? You lookin' for a slug in the belly? Mind you, Bogard, I'm gettin' tired of your ways. My patience is about run out."

"And your nerve, too, Jones. Why are you beginning to sweat? It's because you're scared stiff, afraid of Julian Patullo who has brought Teresa Devore to this jail."

"Why—why, you blasted fool, are you loco? A kidnaper in my jail! Damned if I ain't got a notion to drill you for sayin' such a thing." Barney dropped his eyes to the man's gun. He saw a fat finger trembling on the trigger. Jones was desperate indeed. He could shoot and have a ready explanation for it; for wasn't Barney standing there in his sock feet? Hadn't he sneaked into the jail?

Barney was thinking swiftly, trying to devise some sort of ruse that would put him within reach of that gun when, out of the darkness of a doorway behind the sheriff, a form appeared. It moved without sound, edging into the narrow circle of light. Barney swallowed quickly as he recognized Tony Patterson. Tony laid a finger across his lips indicating caution. In his right hand was Little John Cope's gun.

"Well," said Barney, "maybe I'm wrong, Jones. A man never learns anything unless he makes a try for it. If you want me to get out, then I'll go."

Jones opened his mouth to speak, and there was evident relief in his eyes. But just at that instant Tony brought the butt of the gun down on the sheriff's head. Jones grunted and pitched forward into Barney's arms. Barney lowered the huge bulk to the floor and said in a loud voice, "Well, so long then. Be seeing you again." He reached back and closed the door with a thump.

Tony ran a nervous palm over the butt of the gun he held. "How'd you happen to come here?" he whispered.

"A matter of elimination; this was the only place left to look," replied Barney in equally low tones. "Why are you here?"

"I've been in town. Wanted to watch Wolfe and see if he wouldn't lead me to—to him. I saw Jones fetch some

food over, more'n he could eat, and I knew there was no prisoners in the cells."

"Good reasoning," Barney approved. "You just slipped in the back way. I saw you. Is Patullo back there?"

Tony shook his head. "The cells are all empty. There's nothing in the shed out back except Jones' horse. I'm afraid he ain't here after all."

"Let's have a look. Quiet now."

They went back to the jail corridor, along the line of empty cells. Sure that Tony was right, Barney risked a match. He looked around, at the floor and up at the ceiling, and immediately extinguished the match. Above the middle cell was a trap door in the ceiling and there were smudges on the boards where palms had been pressed. He whispered this discovery to Tony.

"How we going to get up there? No ladder here."

Barney felt of the cross bars on the cell. They formed a perfect ladder. He put his feet into the squares and began to climb. Tony pulled at his leg.

"Me!" he husked. "I want to do it."

Barney reached down, took the hand on his leg and pulled upward. They went up the bars side by side. By standing on the top of the cell they could easily touch the trap door above. As Barney reached for it the thing began to slide back.

"Is he gone?" hissed a voice almost at his head.

Barney roughed up his voice in an attempt to imitate Jones.

"Yeah," he growled.

"Then you'd better get back there and watch out for him. Bogard ain't easy fooled. How he figured this out is beyond me, which goes to prove— Aw, get back down before you fall and break your blasted fat back."

Barney made a shuffling sound to conceal the swift pulling of his gun. As it came up the muzzle struck the edge of the trap door.

"Hey! What the hell do you mean by that?" snarled the man above him.

Barney pulled the trigger, but sensed that he had been too late. The bullet tore upward through the place where Patullo's face had been and buried itself in the roof of the jail. Instantly thereafter lead slugs began tearing downward through the ceiling. Barney shifted his gun into the opening and shot again. The return fire did not cease.

The corridor resounded to a loud report that came from the office door. Buff Jones stood there braced against the door-frame, his bulk outlined in the light from behind. He shot again and the bullet tore into the ceiling near Barney's head. Then Tony shot from a crouching position on top the cell and Buff Jones swayed back to crash full length inside his office.

"I didn't hit him hard enough the first time," said Tony. "Let me up through that hole."

Barney lifted his gun over the trap door sill, took quick aim in the direction the shots were coming from through the ceiling, and pulled the trigger. Back along the boards was the sound of a sodden thump. Dust sifted down into their faces.

"You got him!" cried Tony accusingly. "I wanted that for myself."

"I reckon it's better this way, kid. But let's don't be too sure. Julian Patullo is tricky. Give me a boost."

Tony hoisted with all his strength and Barney shot into the attic. Quickly he rolled to one side, and lucky for him, for red flame boomed along the floor and a bullet zoomed over the spot where he had first landed. He rolled over once more and then fired at the place where the flame had leaped. There was no reply.

"Put a match up through the hole, Tony," he directed.

Tony obeyed. The light showed a form doubled up some twenty feet from where Barney crouched. Barney had seen men lie like that before and he knew then that Julian Patullo had pulled his last trick.

"I'm coming up," said Tony.

"Stay where you are. There's some-

thing I've got to hand down to you."

"Teresa?"

"Yes."

Teresa lay bound and gagged against the east wall of the attic, just opposite the trap door. Barney crawled to her, fumbled with the ropes about her wrists and finally managed to loosen the knots. She jerked off the gag and threw her arms about his neck.

"Barney! Oh, Barney, it's been terrible. I was wondering if you would ever come."

He held her closely, his lips brushing through the cobwebs that netted her hair. "Tess," he murmured. "My little Tess!"

"I've been lying here praying," she whispered, pressing her face against his. "Praying that you'd think of Brewster, of this place. I tried to send my thoughts out to you, guide you here, and they did."

"Seems as though," he said. "Pauline is waiting outside and we'd better get to her. She's been almost crazy, Tess."

He let her down through the trap door, and Tony caught her in his arms, guiding her feet to the top of the cell. Together they helped her down the bars and out through the corridor. They stepped over the prone form of Buff Jones and came to the outer door where several men and Pauline stood waiting. Barney put Tess into her mother's arms and then faced the men who had come up from the saloon, attracted by the sound of the shots.

"Jones is dead," he told them, "and there's another dead one in the attic."

"Say," said the bartender, wiping his hands nervously on his apron, "has this somethin' to do with the kidnapin' we heard about?"

"Exactly. The man in the attic is the kidnaper. Jones was helping him, in on the deal."

"Well, what do you know? And that's the girl, eh?"

"Sure; you've seen Miss Devore before. Now, men, I've got to get back to the ranch. You fellows look after Jones and that other man up above. I'll be back to town later and look after things."

As they nodded he turned back to the others. Tony was standing to one side, his features working as he witnessed what went on between Tess and her mother. He moved up to Barney and said, "Is it all right if I drift now? Nothin' to keep me here any more."

"Not even your old job up at the ranch?" asked Barney.

Tony shook his head. "I couldn't stay there now. Miss Pauline would never trust me and—and—well, you know how I feel about Tess. She loves you, not me."

Barney patted the boy's shoulder. "Just as you like, Tony. If you want to drift it's all right with me. But keep your hands clean in the future. And my thanks for what you've done."

Tony nodded and slipped away.

"Pauline," said Barney, "we've some mighty good friends up yonder making a futile hunt, and I reckon we'd better get back and call 'em in."

She left Teresa and came to him, put her arms about him and kissed him full on the lips. "You understand what that's for," she whispered. "It's a mother's blessing and a plea for forgiveness for all the things I've said to you."

He linked his arms in theirs and led them back to where they had left the horses. Pauline mounted the gelding and waved toward the big stallion.

"But Mother, Zulu has never carried double before," cried Tess.

"Then it's high time he learned it," said Pauline. "I imagine he'll have a lot of that work to do from now on." Her eyes filled with tears and she kicked the gelding into a lope.

Barney lifted Tess to the saddle and then made a flying leap to land behind her. Zulu seemed to squat down for an instant, ears back and nostrils distended. Then, with a snort, he leaped forward so swiftly that Tess was thrown back against Barney's breast. Barney wrapped his arms about her, held her tightly as Zulu raced for the mesa and home.

Monte tried to make out it was just concern for her little nephew that made him show so much interest in Molly Clark. But he didn't fool anybody with that tale, not even himself.

Orphan of the Desert

By Eric Howard

THERE was nothing at Juniper Mesa but a store, a stage station and a hotel, all in one large, rambling building. On all sides the desert stretched away to the horizon. Here on the mesa, junipers struggled up among the outcropping boulders, fantastically eroded. There was no water on the mesa except what was caught in the cisterns old Tim McCormick had dug.

When Monte Lane rode up to the store building that early spring morning, everything was quiet and somehow desolate. Not even a dog barked. As he dismounted and walked up to the door, a lizard scurried across his path; that was the only sign of life—until he heard that pleasant, gurgling sound.

He stepped inside and looked around curiously.

"Well, I'll be—" he began, then stopped.

He'd have to watch his language in this company. He stood there, hat pushed back from his bronzed face, and grinned at the person on the floor.

That person, a blue-eyed baby with yellow curls, perhaps two years old, smiled back at Monte, pounded the floor with a large spoon held in a chubby hand, and made more of those pleasant gurgling sounds.

Monte took a step forward, squatted on his heels, and looked at the baby.

"Where'd you come from, feller?" he inquired. "Where is everybody?"

The baby dropped the spoon and reached for Monte's hand. It caught his thumb and held on, tight.

"By golly, he likes me!" Monte said. "What do you know?"

He picked the child up then, and it seemed to like that, too.

"Tim!" he called. "Where are you, Tim?"

Carrying the baby at his shoulder, he walked back of the counter and through a door that led into Tim McCormick's living-room. Beyond that was his bedroom.

"Be right with you," Tim said sleepily.

"I thought you always claimed you got up before sunrise," Monte chaffed. "What's up? There's nobody around but this little feller I've got here."

"The baby?" old Tim said. "Must 'a' crawled out. Yeah. Had a bed on the floor in here. Babies always wake up early. Little beggar's likely hungry, they always are."

Tim came out of the bedroom, pulling his suspenders up over his undershirt. His heavy shock of gray hair was touseled, his face seemed gray and haggard. He looked very tired.

"Up 'most all night, Monte," he explained. "The little feller's mama—she was took sick on the stage. Stopped off here to rest up and died about two o'clock in the mornin'. Heart just stopped beatin'. Shock of some kind, it looked like to me. My cook got drunk again and quit before the stage pulled in. Rode off on his mule, cussin' me. After the lady died, I sent Joe off to notify the sheriff and Alec down to tell the schoolma'am at Crescent Valley.

"The schoolma'am is this lady's sister, seems like. She was goin' there to visit her, takin' the baby. Mebbe she knew she wasn't goin' to live long; I kind of got that from what little she said. We done all we could for her, but there was just no helpin' her. Seemed like she didn't want to live—not enough to fight for it."

The baby pulled Monte's ear, hit him awkwardly with his tiny fist.

"That's sure tough on the little feller," Monte said.

Old Tim nodded. "He taken a likin' to you. Well, we'd best feed him. Reckon this soft breakfast food will do with some milk on it."

"Yeah, I think he could go that," Monte agreed, following Tim into the big kitchen which the departing cook had left in disorder. "He's been fed good, all right. Fat as butter."

Tim got a fire going in the big stove, put on water in the tea-kettle. Then he turned to Monte, who was still holding the child.

"Put him down," he said. "Want you should see the lady. Mebbe you knew her. The stage driver said she give the name of Graham, Mrs. Graham."

"Graham?" Monte said. "Only Graham I knew was Rick Graham. Used to run a cow outfit over Rinçon way. Got hurt in a rodeo, I heard, and died. I don't know the Crescent Valley schoolma'am. She's new down there."

He followed old Tim into a bedroom. Tim cleared his throat and adjusted the window shade. He slipped the sheet down and Monte, with a tightness in his throat, blinked his eyes and looked at the pale, lovely face, framed with dark hair, of the woman whose heart had stopped beating.

"No," he said, turning away, "I never saw her before. It's a cryin' shame she had to be taken from her baby."

"Yes," Tim nodded. "Seemed like there was no fight left in her."

When they returned to the kitchen, the tea-kettle was singing. Monte picked up the baby and held him while Tim prepared breakfast.

"Could be Rick Graham's boy, all

right," he observed. "Rick had light hair and blue eyes. Mighty fine feller, too. Had some hard luck—I heard he lost his outfit some way. Then he went in for rodeo work. Got hurt bad, bulldoggin', I heard. Sick quite a spell, and died. What's the schoolma'am's name?"

"Clark or somethin'," Tim said, testing the cereal he had cooked. "This here ain't too hot or too cold. Ought to go down all right."

Monte was spoon-feeding the child and doing a very good job of it when they heard horses outside. Tim got up and went through the building, while Monte went on with the task at hand.

"You're a man after my own heart," he said. "You sure got a appetite!"

A GIRL came running into the kitchen. Tim was talking to another man, as they walked that way. The girl halted, and Monte looked up at her. She was like her sister in appearance; dark hair, brown eyes, the same perfection of features. But she was smaller, younger; and there was about her the glow of health.

She put out her arms for the child and Monte held him up. She held the baby in a close embrace, her cheek against his head, and sobbed, "Ricky, Ricky, darling!"

Again Monte felt that tightness in his throat. The little fellow was Rick Graham's son. It was sure tough! He had lost his father, as fine a man as Monte knew; now he had lost his mother. There were tears in the girl's eyes.

She murmured: "Poor baby! She just didn't want to live—even for you—after Rick—"

The baby squirmed and pointed to the bowl of cereal.

"Me!" he said.

"I reckon he wants to finish his breakfast, miss," Monte suggested. "Just let me have him—"

The girl let him take the child and he went on with the job of feeding him. He glanced up as Tim and another man stepped into the kitchen.

"Oh, Bob!" the girl said, and went into the arms of the tall, heavily built man who had come with her.

"There, there!" the man said, patting her shoulder. "You've got to be brave, Molly." He looked at Monte. "Oh, hello, Lane," he said.

"Howdy, Randall," Monte said curtly.

Both Tim and the girl, Molly Clark, looked from one man to the other. There was unmistakable antagonism between them. It was in their expressions, their tone of voice, in the cold flash of their eyes.

Monte glanced away, gave his attention to the child. He heard the girl say, as she introduced Bob Randall, that he was her fiancé.

When little Ricky had eaten his fill, Monte wiped his face and handed him over to the girl. Ricky gurgled and pulled at Monte's hair.

"You folks set down and I'll stir up some breakfast," Tim offered, as Monte walked outdoors and joined Alec, Tim's helper, who had ridden off in the night to carry the bad news to Molly Clark. Joe, Tim's other hand, showed up with the sheriff, who was driving a light wagon, a little later. Monte stayed outside until he saw that Molly and Randall and the baby were about to leave in Randall's buckboard. Molly smiled at him and beckoned to him. He walked over to the rig and took off his hat. Ricky waved his hands and made pleasant, happy noises.

"Thank you," the girl said, "for taking care of Ricky."

"Yes, thanks, Lane," Randall added.

"You're welcome," Monte said, and it was obvious he addressed the girl only. "So long, son," he added, smiling at Ricky.

Old Tim looked at him curiously after Randall drove off.

"What's the matter with you and that feller Randall?" he inquired.

Monte shrugged. "Nothin' at all," he said. "Well, I'll be buyin' what I need,

Tim, and gettin' back 'fore it gets hotter."

Tim grunted and nodded, and led the way back into the store. He put the provisions Monte bought into two gunny sacks. Monte was carrying them out, tied together, to put on his horse, when Tim lit his pipe and drawled: "Heard Randall say they'd better get married right away, on account of the baby. Said she couldn't go on teachin' with him to take care of."

Monte paused briefly, then went on through the door as though it didn't concern him. He rode off with his usual word to Tim, up to the mining claim he was working with Digger Hughes.

DIGGER HUGHES was a good cowboy, but he was hipped on mining. He was sure he was going to strike it rich some day. He had done packing and guiding for a geologist a few years back, and after that he was no longer content to poke cows for forty a month and chuck. He had finally talked good-natured, easy-going Monte, with six months' pay in his levis, into throwing in with him. So far they had barely dug out eating money, as Monte put it.

Digger, wiping his brow, came out of the shaft and grinned when Monte rode up. He was a few years older than Monte, sandy-haired, freckled, bow-legged. He knew right away that his pardner was thinking about something; he eyed him curiously.

Monte said, as he unsaddled, "Remember Rick Graham, over Rinçon way? You knowed him better'n I did. What were you tellin' me about him and his ranch?"

Digger spat and mopped his brow. "Why, he never did talk much, Rick didn't. But the way I heard it, he put a big plaster on the outfit to raise money to defend a feller that was on trial for murder. Thought he was a friend of his, and Rick always would go to bat for a friend. Right nice feller. Well, this other man got off, all right, but it had cost Rick all the money he borrowed.

"There was a lot of talk. Folks thought this hombre was no friend to Rick. They suspicioned he was hand-in-glove with the loan shark that closed Rick out. Anyway, Rick rode out of Rinçon, broke as they come, and started in to make him a stake, like he had before, in rodeos. Gettin' along fine, married and all—and then come that accident."

He looked at Monte curiously.

Monte told him of the death of Rick Graham's wife at Juniper Mesa and mentioned the child.

"Miz Graham," he said, after a minute, "was headin' for Crescent Valley to visit her sister, the new teacher down there. Takin' the baby along. Then she got sick on the stage, had to stop with Tim. And Tim allows she died of shock of some kind. Oh," he added, looking down at the ground, "this sister, a gal named Molly Clark, it seems is engaged to marry Bob Randall."

"Randall!" Digger exclaimed. "He ain't nobody for any gal to marry. And anyway, he's got one wife."

"Huh?"

"He had one," Digger nodded, "last time I saw him, over at Rinçon. Less'n a year ago. A looker, too."

Monte looked at Digger for a long moment. Then he said, "We're takin' a trip to Rinçon."

"What for? What you got in mind, Monte?"

"That little ol' baby hadn't ought to get Randall for a step-daddy," Monte said. "That's the last thing Rick would want. Come on. We're goin'."

THE pair rode into Rinçon shortly after sunset. They made for the Silver Star saloon to wash the alkali out of their throats. They were at once greeted by friends, who jocularly observed that they had gone broke on

their claim and had come back to look for work on a ranch.

"No, sir!" Digger declared. "We struck it rich and come in to celebrate."

Among those at the bar were the sheriff and the stage driver. These two were discussing the death of Mrs. Graham. She was to be buried tomorrow, the sheriff said.

"Mighty fine lady," said Hank Ralston, the stage driver. "She was all right when she got on. Took sick all of a sudden. Like somethin' mighty startlin' hit her. I didn't hardly know whether to leave her at Tim's or to risk bringin' her on."

"You did the right thing," the sheriff said. "Tim's most as good as a doctor. But there was nothin' he could do when her heart failed. Too bad she had to go, her baby so young and all. But her sister'll take care of the baby, all right."

"I hear she's marryin' Bob Randall," said Hank.

The sheriff nodded, frowning, fingering his glass of Bourbon.

"Well," he said, "Randall's well off. He can take good care of 'em. She'll stop teachin', course."

Hank shook his head. "I don't cotton to Randall."

"No," the sheriff agreed. "But Molly Clark knows her own mind, I reckon."

Digger Hughes looked at the sheriff, spoke up.

"Where's Randall's other wife?" he asked.

The sheriff looked surprised. "Didn't know he had one," he said.

"Last time I was here, eight-nine months ago," Digger said, "I ran into her in the hotel. A swell looker, all got up, like mebbe she'd worked in a dance hall somewhere. She was goin' as Randall's wife."

"Oh, he means May La Rue," Hank said, laughing. "She wasn't his wife. She's a looker, all right, but she's mighty dangerous. She skipped town, right after that tin-horn gambler got stabbed. Done me out of my fare, too, darn her. She's workin' for Buck Cartney in Cristobal. Buck is a match for her, all right."

"He let on she was his wife," Digger muttered. "I didn't know no different then."

Monte nudged him, then said aloud, "One more drink and I'm ready to eat."

When they left the Silver Star and headed for a restaurant, Monte halted Digger with a hand on his arm. He pulled him into a dark doorway.

"You mosey down to the depot, Digger," he said, "and send this May La Rue a telegram. Just say, 'Bob Randall is getting married in Rinçon.' Send it in care of Buck Cartney, at Cristobal. You don't have to sign it."

"What's the idee, Monte? If they wasn't married—"

"I know Cartney. There's a man never passes up an opportunity. If this La Rue woman is like I think, she and Buck'll put their heads together and figger mebbe it would be smart to show up here for the weddin'. If you took her to be his wife, others did. Buck will see a chance to make Randall pay for gettin' her to skip out again."

"Say! Mebbe so."

"Meet me at the Chink's," Monte said.

When he turned into the eating place, he started for a stool at the counter. But as he passed a booth, he heard pleasant gurgling sounds. He looked down.

"Why, hello there, Ricky!" he said.

The baby smiled and flourished a spoon. Molly Clark was holding him, feeding him.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Lane," she said. Ricky remembers you."

"Sure. We're old friends. Aren't we, *niño?*"

Ricky smiled his complete agreement. Monte stood there a moment, head bared.

"I didn't have a chance to tell you," he said. "I knew your brother-in-law, Rick Graham. My pardner, Digger Hughes, knew him even better. We both thought a lot of him. If—if we can ever do anything for Rick's son, we'd like to."

The girl looked up at him, her eyes deeply serious, smiling gently.

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "That's—Oh, there's Bob."

Randall frowned when he saw Monte, but said easily, "Hello, Lane. What brings the big minin' man to town today?"

"Struck it rich," Monte replied quietly. "Had to come in and celebrate."

He saw, with amusement, the quick gleam of greed in Randall's eyes. But Randall laughed boisterously.

"That's fine," he said.

He sat down in the booth opposite Molly. Monte moved away, going to the very last stool at the counter. Digger Hughes came in a little later and paused near the booth when he saw Randall. The latter introduced him to Molly, and Digger spoke quietly to the girl for a moment. Then he joined Monte.

He winked solemnly. After giving his order, he leaned toward his pardner and whispered, "I don't blame you none. She's sure a fine gal."

Monte colored up. "It's the little feller—" he began.

"Sure, sure," Digger agreed. "Mighty fine younker, too."

Monte looked down at his plate. He hadn't faced it, but Digger's words compelled him to think about it. He admitted to himself, now, that the moment he had seen Molly and especially when she stood there, at Tim's, holding Ricky close to her, something had happened to him. He had felt that he had never seen anyone like her. Then when she had turned to Bob Randall, when he heard that she intended to marry Randall, he had been shocked and stunned. A girl like her—and Randall!

MONTE and Digger were both at the funeral the next morning. They stood with the sheriff and others beside the grave, in the little cemetery back of Rinçon's church. Rick Graham was buried there, and now his wife was laid to rest at his side.

Monte saw Molly, very pale, with a handkerchief pressed against her lips, standing beside Bob Randall. His heart went out to her, and once their eyes met.

Ricky had been left at the hotel in the care of a woman who worked there. When Monte and Digger went back to town, they walked into the hotel where they had spent the night. Monte saw Ricky playing on the floor. The child waved its hands.

"Man!" he said, pointing at Monte.

"That *muchacho* sure likes you," Digger observed.

"Yeah, horses and dogs and babies," Monte admitted. "They all take to me somehow."

"Meanin' you ain't so good with growed-up gals?" Digger inquired.

Monte shook his head, then knelt down to share the fun Ricky was having with a toy.

"It's only 'cause I fed him," he said. "Any young animal takes to the people that feed him."

"Well, don't be down-hearted," Digger advised, heading up the stairs. "Take me. Everybody laughed at my minin' notion. Now we've struck it rich, the laugh's on them."

Monte obligingly smiled. That was Digger's idea of humor. They'd never strike it rich, out there.

He was still playing with Ricky, and both were enjoying it, when Molly and Randall came into the hotel. Molly picked up the child, held him close, and said she'd take him up to her room. Randall poked a thick finger at Ricky's stomach and made a foolish noise; Ricky struck at him with a chubby fist. Randall frowned.

When the girl went upstairs, Monte dropped into a chair and stretched his long legs out before him. Randall stood there looking at him for a moment, then pulled out a cigar and lit it. Standing before Monte, who lazily looked up at him, he spoke slowly in a low, grim tone.

"I don't like people buttin' into my affairs, Lane," he said.

"No?"

"I don't want to hear about you or that pardner of yours spreadin' talk about me. I'm marryin' Molly next week."

"Afraid she wouldn't have you if she knew you?"

"I'm just tellin' you not to butt in." He sneered. "You come in here with this talk of strikin' it rich! You're always around, hangin' around. You're always makin' up to that damn kid."

Anger flashed in Monte's eyes at this reference to Ricky, but he yawned and smiled.

"Oh, me and Ricky, we're friends. Aim to go on bein' friends. I'll be comin' around to see him, after you're married. I reckon you won't object, will you? Why? I like Ricky, and he sort of likes me."

Randall leaned forward, glaring, his jaw thrust out.

"Yeah?" he said.

Monte raised his right leg, thrust his foot forward, shoved Randall back.

"Get out of my scenery," he said, and his tone was cold and metallic. "The last time you and me tangled you lost four teeth. Remember?"

For a moment it seemed that Randall would snatch a gun from a holster beneath his long coat. Monte continued to sit on his spine, at ease, his eyes cold and scornful as they looked into Randall's. The latter muttered something, turned and walked out.

He almost collided with Hank Ralston, the stage driver, in the doorway. Hank glared at him and wouldn't give an inch. Swearing, Randall stepped aside, let Hank pass.

"I wanted to see you, Monte," Hank said.

"Well, here I am," Monte said lazily.

Hank sat down beside him. "I was talkin' to Colonel Custer from out Crescent Valley," he said. "He was on the stage yestiddy. It was him that told Miz Graham her sister Molly was goin' to marry Bob Randall. And it was right after that, Monte, that she got sick. Seems she had a bad heart and it's likely the shock done it. There's somethin' back of this. She must 'a' knowed Randall, knowed he was no good. The idea of his marryin' her sister bowled her over. The colonel was sure sorry he told her."

Monte pulled himself up. He looked at Hank.

"Then, if she knew Randall, he must have known Rick Graham," he said.

"That's what I been thinkin'," Hank nodded. "There's somethin' back of this."

Digger came down all spruced up. He joined the others, bit off a chew of Hank's plug, and listened to what they had to say.

"By the jinks, mebbe I got it!" he announced. "Remember I was tellin' you, Monte, about how Rick mortgaged and lost his spread to help out a feller on trial for murder? That feller's been runnin' the ranch for the loan-shark that took it over ever since. His name's Waddell. But you know, he looks somethin' like Randall. I wouldn't be surprised if they was kin. Like you say, Miz Graham likely knew all about Randall. Mebbe he and Waddell, if that's his name, was back of all their trouble. It was just too much for her."

Monte said thoughtfully, "Might be. Let's see what the sheriff knows."

The sheriff didn't know much. He hadn't been in office when Waddell was tried. He hardly knew the man. He discounted Digger's guess that Waddell and Randall were related; so far as he knew, they had never been together. He disliked Randall, he assured them; he knew of plenty of mean, petty things he had done. But there was nothing he could arrest him for, and if Molly Clark wanted to marry him, that was her business.

"Her hard luck, you mean," Digger put in. "And the baby's."

The sheriff shrugged. "Well, I can't stop it. S'pose I went to her and told her I don't like Randall and she'd best not wed him. How would that sound?

Likely, she'd be just that much more set on it."

"Yeah," Monte said. "That's right. Well, let's go over and celebrate a little. Ain't you heard? Digger struck it rich."

They repaired to the Silver Star. They were standing at the bar, Monte thoughtful, Digger and Hank exchanging tall tales, when the barkeep paused in the wiping of a glass and said to Hank: "There's your friend, May La Rue, Hank."

"I'm a Gila monster if it ain't!" Hank said, going to the window and staring at the overdressed woman who was entering the hotel on the arm of a bulky man. "Who's that with her?"

"That's Buck Cartney from Cristobal," Digger said. "The toughest man in the state, so he claims. And the crookedest gambler."

"What you s'pose they're doin' here?" someone asked. "May was run out of town. Cartney ain't wanted here."

A boy came out of the hotel a few minutes later and ducked into the saloon. He asked if anybody had seen Bob Randall.

"Who wants him?" Hank inquired.

"A gent over there. He just got in. Gave me a dollar to hunt him up."

The boy ran out to find Randall. Digger nudged Monte. It was less than fifteen minutes before they saw Randall, stalking along as though angry, on his way to the hotel.

Monte leaned toward Digger. "Mosey over and see what happens," he said.

When Digger started out, Hank followed him. They linked arms, staggered as though drunk. Monte smiled. He'd go over later.

WHEN he left the saloon and crossed to the hotel, he entered cautiously. The last time he had seen Buck Cartney, the gambler had threatened to shoot him. Monte had knocked an ace out of his sleeve and had scooped up the winnings on a poker table.

There was no one in the lobby but the clerk, back of the desk.

"Where's everybody?" Monte asked.

"Your pardner and Hank went up to your room, drunk as lords," the clerk said. "Mr. Cartney took number one, the best. Him and the lady and Mr. Randall are all up there, talking. I wish you'd see to it your pardner and Hank don't do any damage."

"Sure," Monte said, and started up the stairs.

At the very top, he saw Ricky blinking at him. The baby was perched on the edge of the top step. He put out his hands, gurgled, and rolled forward. Monte reached down and picked him up. Surprised, breathless for a moment, Ricky then let out a manly howl.

"Sh!" said Monte. "Take it easy, feller. You're all right. A little spill like that never hurt a butter ball. How you goin' to ride the horse I've got for you if you can't stand a little old fall?"

His voice soothed the child. Monte wondered where Molly was, how it happened Ricky was alone.

"Oh!" he heard her exclaim. "I—I heard Ricky crying."

Monte looked up. "My fault, I reckon. Saw me comin' up and started for me. He's all right now. Why, what's wrong, Miss Molly? Why are you crying?"

The girl covered her eyes with her hands, turned and started blindly down the hall. Monte followed, carrying the child. He stepped through the open door of her room.

"If—if there's anything I can do—" he began.

"No," she sobbed. "There's nothing."

"You want me to take care of Ricky for a while?" he asked.

She controlled herself, then, and put out her arms.

"No, thanks, I'll take care of him. I—I won't neglect him again, not for anything, not for a moment."

Monte handed him over, retreated and closed the door. Frowning, he

went on down the hall to his and Digger's room.

He found the pair grinning gleefully over something.

"It worked!" Digger said. "It worked!"

"What worked?" Monte asked, scowling.

"That note I shoved under her door," Digger said. "Told her to listen at the door of number one and she'd hear somethin' that concerned her. Signed it 'A Friend.' Told her not to think about eavesdroppin', on account some folks didn't deserve any consideration. She went—she listened—and what she heard sent her back down the hall like she didn't know where she was. She prob'ly heard Randall offerin' to pay off Cartney and May if they'd get out and keep still."

"We shouldn't 'a' done it," Monte said, shaking his head sadly. "Now she's broken-hearted."

"That's a sight better'n bein' married to Randall!" Hank said with considerable emphasis.

Monte heard a door open and close. Peering out, he saw Randall moving from number one toward Molly's door. He watched him. Randall lifted his big hand and knocked. Molly must have spoken to him, for he leaned close to the door, then knocked again. When she didn't admit him, he pounded on the door, spoke angrily, seized the knob.

He stepped back then and hunched his shoulder.

"That'll do, Randall!" Monte said sharply. "Move on!"

Randall faced him, swore. Monte moved toward him. Again, Randall seemed about to draw; but he hesitated, afraid. Monte moved on, slowly, steadily, watching him. He passed the door of number one without a glance.

"Damn you, Lane!" Randall said. "I told you what I'd do if you butted in on my business. I warned you!"

"Do it," Monte said. "Go for your gun. Go ahead."

Randall's eyes wavered. He licked his lips. Then he laughed exultantly and cried, "Get him, Buck!"

Monte moved like lightning. He flung his arms around Randall and whirled him around.

Their positions were reversed, even as Buck Cartney began to say, "Remember, Lane, what I said I'd do?"

Now Randall was before Monte, and Monte smiled at Cartney over his shoulder.

"I remember, Buck," he said. "You can shoot me—through your friend, Randall."

"Break away from him, Bob!" Buck said.

Monte laughed. He had his left arm hooked around Randall's neck, his right knee against his back.

"Before he does that, I'll choke him to death," he said slowly.

He spoke very slowly, because Digger was tiptoeing down the hall, back of Cartney, his gun in his hand. And then, suddenly, he swung the barrel of his gun; and Cartney fell to the floor, face down.

"*Bueno,* pard," Monte said, and thrust a winded Randall away from him.

A woman screamed. It was May La Rue. She fell to her knees at Buck's side, lifted his head in her arms.

"Damn you, Bob!" she cried. "Wait till Buck—"

Monte heard Molly's door open. He saw her frightened, tear-stained face.

"Take care o' these three, Digger," he said. "You and Hank."

"We sure will."

He stepped into Molly's room, closed the door.

"Never mind all that, out there," he said gently. "You've been through a lot. That's passed now. You've got Ricky to look after."

The girl wiped away her tears, drew a deep breath and smiled. Ricky was asleep on the bed, his round cheeks flushed, his bright hair curling over his head.

"Yes," Molly said. "That woman is his wife, Bob's wife. They were mar-

ried in Mexico. He was paying her to leave town, not to let me know. I must have been mad. I was lonely out in Crescent Valley, and when he came to see me often, bringing a horse for me to ride, I—I— But I've known, ever since Ricky's been with me, that it couldn't be."

"Don't you think about it any more," Monte said. "The sheriff will iron everything out. You just take good care of Ricky. And if I can help any, you let me know."

"Thank you," she said, looking at him for a long moment.

Monte, thinking of how hard up he was, cleared his throat and retreated. After all, he hadn't anything to offer her—except love and affection for Ricky. She'd need more than that to give up her teaching and take care of the boy right. She'd need a home, a good home, and a man who had something.

He was thinking along those lines when Digger found him. Digger reported that the sheriff had sent a deputy out to pick up Waddell. May La Rue had said he was Randall's cousin. May had told them a lot more—the sheriff had scared her into talking by threatening to reopen the investigation of the stabbing of a gambler that had preceded her departure from Rinçon.

"Yeah," Monte said, nodding idly.

"Is that all you got to say?" Digger demanded. "Come on. Let's celebrate strikin' it rich and everything."

"That joke's old, Digger. We ain't rich, we're never goin' to be rich."

"Why, blast your eyes!" Digger exclaimed. "I been tellin' you all day I struck it! A vein of the highest-grade quartz ever I see, right where I knowed it had to be. What you mean, we ain't rich?"

"Honest?" Monte said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I been tellin' you! You ain't listened. You been thinkin' only of that gal and the baby. I been sayin' all along— Say, how'd you make out anyway?"

Monte looked up at the hotel windows.

"Why," he said slowly, smiling, "if that vein of yours is rich enough to keep a fam'ly, I reckon we'll all make out just fine!"

And they did.

Murray found it no trouble at all to live up to the old adage to

Love Thy Neighbor

By Austin Corcoran

MURRAY DENTON hadn't stepped down from his saddle in Rifle that morning when he was hit by the first surprise of the day, and not an agreeable one. He glimpsed the narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered figure of a youngish man emerge from the Winchester Hotel.

"Alibi Ed!" Murray muttered, his expression clouding. "What the hell's brought him back here?"

Ed Beaumont's presence in the neighborhood was suggestive of unpleasantness and the decided *tap-tap* of his boot heels held a challenge to memories that brought a frown to Murray's dark, level brows. This smoothed when a chuckling voice hailed him.

"'Lo, Denton, heard the big news? The Mule Shoe's sold at last," Jimmy Dalton announced, a wide smile on his ruddy features. "And get a load of this, cowboy," he added. "Old Prof. Henry Wadsworth Richards from Glenwood has bought the outfit. He's here now on his way over to move in, stopped at the hotel last night."

"What's he going to do with a run-down ranch like that?" Murray said. "He don't know anything but school teaching. I betcha he's been principal of the Glenwood schools for twenty odd years."

"Mebbeso," Jimmy replied. "All I know about him is that he's got a girl that can knock any fellow cuckoo with one look. Is *she* a humdinger!"

"Believe he has got a daughter," Murray agreed with outward indifference but aware of a sudden uplifting of his mood. "Saw her once or twice when I was over at the county seat."

"Only wisht I had your place," Dalton grinned, "so they'd be *my* next door neighbors."

"Across a good piece of range and beyond the ridge," Murray commented as he got down and tied his horse to a

hitch-rail near the corner. He was glad Dalton turned into a nearby store, for an involuntary glance toward the hotel discovered a girl in front of the entrance, looking this way then that as if she were on the watch for somebody. She was hatless and the clear morning light revealed the rich shading of her chestnut hair.

"That's her," Murray thought, impulsively heading that way. A few seconds later he was bowing to her. A wave of confusion and diffidence battered him as she lifted brown eyes that were far more disturbing to equilibrium than any previous experience encountered by Murray Denton.

"Excuse me, b-but I just heard that your father's b-bought the Mule Shoe," he heard himself say stammeringly. "I'm Murray Denton a-and—"

"Our nearest neighbor," she put in, the corners of her lips lifting in a smile that added to the devastation wrought by her eyes. "I'm Marcella Richards and I remember you at the Glenwood rodeo last fall."

"Marcella! Isn't your father coming yet?" a worried voice questioned from inside the doorway.

"Not yet, Mother, but there's lots of time," Marcella replied cheerfully as the door opened for the exit of a middle-aged woman whose graying hair still held warm lights.

When introductions had been concluded, Murray said, "I wanted to tell you folks I'd be mighty glad to do anything I can to help you get settled." He felt almost as if he were floating along on clouds as he visioned the multitude of ways in which he might be useful to a man who couldn't possibly know anything about the cattle business.

"It's going to be very difficult," Mrs. Richards sighed. "We've always lived in town, but my husband has been obsessed with the desire to own a ranch, and when he unexpectedly came into some money he bought this place."

"You'll get used to it," Murray encouraged, his gaze on the girl's vivid face. "I was raised on this range and I'll be glad to help Mr. Richards with the handling of his cattle, or in any way I can be useful."

"It's kind of you, but he won't be needing that sort of help," Mrs. Richards said easily. "Henry put up the money but he's taken a partner who will manage all the cattle work. A very fine young man, quite superior in fact, who thoroughly understands cattle ranching. You may know of him, Edgar Beaumont."

Murray felt his mouth go slack, then he tautened through the length of his six feet one inch. Alibi Ed!

The sudden changing of Marcella's expression, the barrier that went up before the previous warm friendliness of her eyes told him that his own expression must have betrayed his dislike for Beaumont.

"Yes, I know him," he replied without enthusiasm, remembering with recurring anger the time when Edgar Beaumont had been on *his* payroll.

"I was so worried," Mrs. Richards went on, "when Henry insisted upon investing everything in a ranch and resigning from his position. But when he met Edgar and accepted his advice, I knew that things would work out. It was he who told us about this Mule Shoe place. And he says there's not the slightest doubt that Henry will double on his investment in the five years of their partnership agreement, Mr. Denton."

"I hope you're right," Murray said after a hasty fumbling for some remark he could safely make. You couldn't tell people bluntly that they had made a bad bargain all around. The Mule Shoe had always been a natural loser and Ed Beaumont was nothing but a smooth-tongued, no-account liar, adept at alibing himself out of any situation. Like a picture flashed on a screen, Murray was seeing the run-down buildings and equipment of the old ranch, its scrubby cattle and horses. Not only the most expert management but considerable money would be required to build up the outfit, and he

could scarcely believe that Professor Richards possessed the latter.

"Here they come now," Mrs. Richards exclaimed, beaming at the taller of the two approaching men.

Murray noted the marked deference with which Beaumont bowed to her, then the ardor of his expression when his glance flashed to Marcella, deepening the color in her cheeks. His greeting to Denton was the indifferent sort of nod bestowed upon someone of no importance, with an equally casual remark of introduction.

"Denton—yes, yes," Richards said, his near-sighted gaze passing vaguely over Murray. "You own the Cross D, I believe."

"I do," Murray replied, restraining the irritation aroused by Beaumont's slighting manner. "I was just telling your wife I'll be glad if I can be of service to you folks. Understand the cattle business is a new venture for you and I'd like you to feel that I'm right handy, ready to help any time I can." He had spoken rapidly to forestall any interruption on Beaumont's part.

There was none. Beaumont stood at ease, hat shoved back to reveal the wave of blond hair beneath which the dark brown color of his eyes was surprising. He moved closer to Marcella to whom he said something inaudible to the others, his manner completely disregarding Denton's presence or words.

"Thanks," Richards said politely. "My partner has lifted the burden of management from my shoulders so I'm unlikely to trespass on your kindness. All I have to do is to enjoy my ranch and leave the problems to him." He turned to his wife. "The supplies are loaded and we're ready to start, my dear."

A few seconds later Murray Denton stood alone before the hotel, gazing after the receding quartette and still smarting from the glance flicked over him by Beaumont as he turned to accompany Marcella. "Aw hell! I'm not going to let that bird get under my skin," he muttered, attempting to dismiss the matter. "One more failure of the Mule Shoe isn't my business."

But the recent scene continually repeated itself in memory as he went about his errands. It was a damn shame, for the Richards seemed like awfully nice people, while the girl, well—Murray had remembered Marcella with a clarity that was unusual, considering the few times he had formerly seen her, and each so briefly.

"She kind of liked me," he thought, "then Alibi Ed showed up and scattered poison in the air, damn him!"

The reception given to his news item by the two Cross D cowpunchers when they rode in to supper that evening was gratifying.

"Alibi Ed, my Gawd!" Dee Parks exclaimed, his lean features twisting into a grimace of disgust. "I wouldn't have thought he'd ever come back into this country, the way he was showed up for a liar."

"He's got gall," Beck Remson said, "and Ed can talk the four legs off a dog. That prof would be easy meat for him."

"Seems to me Richards has a darned pretty girl," Dee remarked thoughtfully. "And knowin' Beaumont, I get the idea. The Mule Shoe's off the beaten trail. Ed'll have things his own way. He'll manage to grab onto any cash that comes into sight, *and* he'll likely fool the women plenty with that slick tongue and smooth manners.

"The way you fired that bird, I wouldn't think he'd ever get within reaching distance of you," Dee went on to Murray. "I betcha he hates you clean through to your spinal column."

Denton merely shrugged, then changed the subject. But he was squirming inwardly as he recalled the beaming smile with which Mrs. Richards had favored Beaumont and his confident, attentive manner when he walked away with Marcella.

"I'll keep on my own range," he decided."

THIS decision was firmly adhered to through the next week or so, despite the fact he could not forget how Marcella had looked when he first spied her in front of the hotel. A number of times he'd forcibly to wrench his imagination from picturing her riding with him over the range country. Murray had always liked girls and rarely missed a neighborhood picnic or dance, but never before had a girl clung to his thoughts when he was back in the saddle working cattle. Work and social life had always been definitely separated, but now it was becoming impossible to keep Marcella from sharing his waking hours almost as completely as if she were actually riding along at his side.

At breakfast one morning Dee Parks remarked, "Do you know, I haven't seen Big Domino lately."

Big Domino had been so called because he was the largest of ten thoroughbred bulls Murray had brought in that spring, all from the famous Prince Domino strain.

"He's probably hiding out in some canyon, he'll show up again soon," Murray dismissed the subject to lay out some immediate work that had to be done.

It was a shockingly hot day for that high country, and about mid-forenoon Murray turned off his course to pass a spring where he could get a cool drink. As he made his way through the scattered bunches of cattle lingering near the watering place, he noticed several Mule Shoe cows. "That's queer," he thought.

While it was true that no line fence divided the Mule Shoe and Cross D ranges, the high, steep-sided ridge between provided a barrier cattle had never crossed. After he and his horse had drunk their fill, Murray rounded up the Mule Shoe cows. A temptation that daily nagged him had now become irresistible. Putting the cows back on their own range would provide an excuse to visit the other ranch and see Marcella again.

"And that will get her off my mind," he reflected. "Anything you try special not to do always keeps eating on you."

He headed the cows toward a saddle in the hogback, the only spot where the ridge could be crossed. There was no trail, merely a way you could work through the rimrock sides if you knew the route. After an hour of much sweating by man and horse, he had the animals back on their own side of the ridge. When they had safely made the descent of the steep slope he would let them drift and ride on to the Mule Shoe ranch house.

"I won't say a word about the cows," he decided. "I aim to make this a strictly friendly visit, and I know darned well the old man hadn't a thing to do with putting them over on my place. That would be Alibi Ed's bright idea for getting a few thoroughbred calves free."

He had nearly reached the level when his eye was caught by a bright flash of color and a long-legged black horse came gingerly stepping along a brush-shaded rim that slanted toward him. In the saddle was Marcella, the orange hue of her blouse bringing out the rich coloring of the braids that swung over her shoulders. Levis were tucked into cute little russet boots and gauntlet gloves of the same shade covered the small hands.

"Hello, neighbor," she greeted him gaily. "I thought we had a new cowboy when I saw you hazing Mule Shoe cows along."

Murray explained where he had found them, noting that the fact held no apparent significance for the girl. A dimple tucked itself more deeply at the corner of her mouth as she said, smiling up at him, "Do you expect me to bring your cows home when I find them on our side of the ridge?"

"You won't," he told her confidently. "They wouldn't come themselves. I never knew this to happen before." A

motion of his hand indicated the Mule Shoe cows.

Marcella looked at him thoughtfully but Murray did not pursue the subject. Instead he asked, "How do you like ranching?"

"It's wonderful," she replied, her face lighting. "Daddy and I love it. I'm sure he doesn't know yet what it's all about, but owning a ranch is what he's always dreamed about and he feels happy and secure. He doesn't have to worry any more about what will happen when he must retire. Of course the house is in pretty bad shape, but Ed says the sale of a few beef cattle will fix that fine. Right now the thing to do is to get the beef in good shape, isn't it?"

"That's the idea," Murray agreed, marking the contrast of her long silky lashes against the clear-toned flesh of her cheek.

"It's lucky that Daddy doesn't have to look after any of the work," Marcella laughed merrily, "but he gets a big kick out of talking over things with Ed. And Ed explains wonderfully, Daddy says, like reading out of a book. I'm the real hand of the family," she dimpled at Murray. "I've been helping Ed round up cattle and brand calves. And you should see me throw a rope—Ed's teaching me and this morning I almost caught a calf!"

"Fine," Murray declared heartily but there was a bleak look in his level eyes.

Ed—Ed—Ed! It was clear that Beaumont dominated everything at the Mule Shoe. But you couldn't gain a thing by speaking your mind on that subject. Right now Alibi Ed had the inside track completely grabbed.

"Been thinking I'll have the cook get up a big dinner Sunday and ask you folks over," Denton said. "Like to show you my outfit."

"Grand!" Marcella exclaimed. "We haven't been any place. Mother will be pleased. It's hard for her to get used to the country. And she's been kind of nervous, though I told her it was ridiculous to imagine we would ever have any trouble with you."

"Trouble?" Murray repeated, giving her an astonished glance.

She flushed, looking slightly uncomfortable, as if she had said more than she intended. "You offered right away to help us," she said hurriedly. "You were so friendly—I've been remembering it. And if it hadn't been for Ed, we should have certainly needed plenty of help."

"But what was that about trouble?" Murray persisted.

"N-nothing," Marcella denied. "Please forget it." The brown eyes were entreating him. "And look," she pointed up at the high sun, "it's nearly noon. Come on over to the house with me and have dinner."

She spurred her horse to a lope that cost Murray's horse no effort to maintain, though the speed halted further speech. And again Denton forgot what they had been saying in the pleasure of looking at Marcella. She certainly could ride, like a feather in the saddle she was, and deserved a much better horse than the scrubby black.

"Hiya!" she lifted her voice in a musical call when they neared the buildings and Murray spied the tall, graceful figure of Beaumont beside the thin, stooped form of the professor on the porch that sagged crookedly from the front of the house. When they rode in close, Denton saw that both faces were unnaturally expressionless. He also caught the look Marcella darted from her father to Beaumont as she said, "I met Murray near the ridge and invited him to dinner." Her eyes were openly and expressively asking them to be friendly.

Beaumont's flaring nostrils and the hardening of his eyes betrayed displeasure and Denton sensed his instantly kindled jealousy. He remained silent, merely nodding coolly to Murray while Richards spoke with a chill politeness in which there was no welcome for the visitor. Murray Denton could not recall ever having encoun-

tered so complete a freeze-out, and it made him mad clean through.

"Brought back the Mule Shoe cows that had been moved over on my range," he said in a quiet, ominous tone to Beaumont. "I'd better not find another bunch of 'em there."

Years of alertness to whispering in class rooms had sharpened Richards' hearing and he caught the words. "Why do you say that, young man?" he demanded sternly.

"Because they wouldn't come over there by themselves," Murray replied.

"An animal may stray any place that is unfenced," Richards stated in his most academic manner. "I like neither your tone nor your accusation. And I warn you that you will get no place starting trouble with me. I am here to stay. You cannot drive me out as you did the Wrays."

"The Wrays?" Murray repeated. "But they were undesirable—"

"In your estimation, I suppose," Richards broke in. "I quite understand."

"But you don't," Murray persisted. "They were a crumby bunch. They took over the place from old Mrs. Lawrence when her husband died and they were gypping her. Ask in Rifle and you'll hear the same thing. I just—"

"That will do," Richards said decisively. "I decline to argue the matter. I had been warned that something of this sort might happen, and while I regret being on unfriendly terms with my nearest neighbor, I refuse to be intimidated by threats or interference. I know how you look upon progressive methods and that you have done all in your power to prevent anybody from making good on the Mule Shoe, with the intention of grabbing the land for yourself when stock and equipment depreciated as low as possible. But you are now up against a man who knows exactly what to do and another who will not be frightened away. This time the ranch is going to build up to success."

"Daddy, Daddy!" Marcella implored, getting down from her horse and putting her hands on Richards' shoulders to shake him gently. "You're not lecturing to a class, please listen a minute. I'm sure Murray wants to be friends with us—"

"Be quiet," Richards commanded with unmistakable authority.

"Come into the house, Marcella," her mother spoke from the doorway. "Let the men settle men's business, you keep out of it."

Marcella looked at Murray. In her clear eyes he read no doubt. They seemed to be asking him to forgive her for bringing him there.

"Go on, daughter," Richards said, pushing her gently but firmly toward the door. Then he turned to Denton, a dignity in his manner that demanded respect even though his judgment was misdirected. "I prefer that you remain entirely off my property," he said firmly. "Please do not come here again."

The distress in Marcella's expression helped Murray to get a grip on his rising temper. To lash out with the fist that itched to slug Beaumont would make a nasty scene, and at the moment he had no proof that it was Ed who had poisoned Richards against him, though he had plenty of suspicion.

"You're mistaken all along the line," he said, bulging muscles betraying the restraint he put upon himself. "I never made trouble for anybody unless they deserved it good and plenty. But I'm out to make it damned hot for a certain lying coyote, and I'm telling him so to his face!"

With a slow, searing look squarely into Beaumont's scornful eyes, Murray swung his horse about and rode unhurriedly away.

"First time I was ever kicked off any man's place," he thought with a wry twist of his firm yet generously moulded mouth. "But Ed isn't going to alibi himself outa this mess of lies, and when I get him dead to rights this time, I'll guarantee he won't show up near me again."

MURRAY no longer assured himself that it was none of his business if the professor had let the slick-tongued Beaumont wangle him into a jackpot where he'd be milked dry of all his money. It would be a damn shame. Richards really was a plucky old boy, deserving an even break at least, even if he did seem to be an awful ignoramus about everything that couldn't be recited from a book. And the missis wasn't a bad sort. Of course she had always been cooped up in town and kept as ignorant as her husband, but she must once have looked a little bit like Marcella—not half so lovely of course—and something should be done to protect her interests. While Marcella—well, Murray saw bright red when he thought of Ed Beaumont even being on speaking terms with Marcella Richards.

"I've got to take a hand in this business," he thought. "Can't risk waiting for Ed to give himself away. I'll cool down while I'm on this trip to Denver and Kansas City and dope out something."

Going into Rifle the next day to take the train for Denver, Murray ran into Dan Little, the cashier of the local bank. They had ridden roundups together as boys and always remained firm friends.

"It's too bad you didn't wring Ed Beaumont's neck that time you fired him," Dan said. "He's swanking around Rifle as if he hadn't been all washed up when he left. Beats hell how that bird can talk himself into an easy spot. He's got Prof. Richards all sewed up and now he's hellbent for the girl. Damned if I don't believe he'll get her, too, he's that smooth!"

Murray compressed his lips and his voice rasped when he asked, "Think Richards shot all his wad when he bought the Mule Shoe?"

"Just about," Dan replied. "Enough balance to pay running expenses for a few months, I'd say. He was in this morning and the boss tried to slip him a word of caution, but he seems to have the idea that folks around here would rather he didn't succeed. He won't listen to a word from anybody but Alibi."

This conversation disturbed Murray deeply. So Beaumont was hellbent for Marcella. He certainly had a manner that impressed women. Marcella was only an inexperienced girl. What if—That thought was cut off abruptly. He couldn't kidnap the girl to get her away from Ed Beaumont. There didn't seem a thing he could do at the moment. And there were affairs of his own, urgent business demanding immediate attention.

It was two weeks later when Murray Denton returned to his ranch. Arriving late at night he had no talk with his two-man crew and it was at breakfast the next morning he put the usual questions.

"Well, boys, how's everything going?" he asked cheerfully.

"Fine," Dee answered, adding with a slight frown, "that is, all except the fact that several of them thoroughbred bulls seem to be hid out for good. Haven't seen a sign of 'em since you left. And old Big Domino never has shown up since that time I told you he wasn't around."

"That so? Well, I'll take a big look around today and see what I can scare up," Murray said, not wanting to voice the suspicion that had immediately been aroused.

He had a hunch where his bulls might be found and, saddling a horse, headed straight for the dip in the hogback. As he threaded his way from rim to rim of the steep slope, he noticed cattle tracks heading in the same direction. On top of these tracks, he noted with keen interest, were numerous marks where a shod horse had passed back and forth. Whatever cattle had crossed over the ridge had been herded there, not the slightest doubt of it.

Murray urged his horse as fast as possible, his rage mounting. "The damn fool!" he muttered. "Trying to get

away with a stunt like this. Wonder what the alibi will be?"

He hadn't ridden far into Mule Shoe range when he spotted a young bull bearing a neatly branded Cross D on his sleek hide. From that moment Denton grew madder and madder, though it proved to be as he had suspected and the bulls were widely scattered. Gathering one at a time, he had rounded up five when he discovered Big Domino. Then he fairly exploded. The most expensive animal in the outfit and he'd certainly been on the Mule Shoe a month, driven off Cross D range before the cowboy had first reported him missing.

Murray did not halt to consider his course. The shortest way home lay past the Richards ranch house. "This is going to be the showdown," he said aloud as he headed that way, driving the bulls before him. "Richards is going to learn plenty about what I think of his partner—four thousand dollars' worth of thoroughbred bulls and the Mule Shoe getting the benefit!"

PROFESSOR RICHARDS was working on a panel of the corral fence when Murray left the animals and rode over. He glimpsed a fluttering of bright blue on the porch and guessed that Marcella was sitting there but did not turn.

"Howdy," he addressed Richards, a sharp edge on his voice.

The older man looked up, barely nodded and went on with his work.

"Mister Richards, where can I find your pardner?" Denton's manner demanded a reply.

"Well, I just can't say," was the stiff reply. "You may remember I asked you to stay off this ranch, to let us alone. Now that you're here, kindly state your business to me."

"I'm sure you know nothing of the matter," Murray said, going on to describe briefly his finding of the bulls, concluding. "Your pardner very conveniently appropriated them during my absence."

"I have nothing to do with the range work," Richards declared, his expression indicating that he had no confidence in anything his neighbor might say. "Now if you will excuse me, I have work to do."

The manner in which he and his business were dismissed, together with the total lack of interest in his accusation, rasped Murray unbearably.

"I shall not stir until I have seen Beaumont," he declared flatly. "Several matters are going to be settled right here."

The older man continued setting the pole as painstakingly as if it were to be on exhibit. But Murray heard the rapid approach of light steps and turned as Marcella reached his side.

"I heard what you said," she told him, adding to Richards, "I think you should listen, Daddy."

The professor stood erect, frowning. "All right," he agreed, "here comes Ed. He'll clear things up."

Beaumont rode up at an easy gait, his glance going from the Cross D bulls to the group at the corral. When he drew rein his lips were quirked with a smile of amusement.

"Howdy, Murray," he said, "I see you got around to collecting your stuff. I've been too busy to shove it back."

"But you weren't too busy to bring it over," Murray said sharply.

"Ed, I want you to settle this business at once. I won't have this fellow constantly coming over here to stir up trouble," Richards said sternly.

"O. K.," Beaumont nodded nonchalantly. "Here it is in a nutshell—Murray got some of your cows over on his range to start things moving in the trouble line, then he put these bulls over here so he could bring a damned mean accusation against your outfit."

"Liar!" Denton's voice lashed through the air.

He dug spurs into his horse, and that animal plunged forward. Murray's hand crashed against Beaumont's mouth,

snapping his head backward and sending him toppling from his saddle to the ground.

"Mercy on us!" came a shrill cry from the house. "Henry! Marcella, run —get away from him."

Murray sprang from his horse as Beaumont lunged to his feet and made for him, murder in his eyes and murder speeding the hand that dragged the gun from his holster.

"Murray!" Marcella screamed.

But he had seen the flash of metal as the gun came up and was on Beaumont before the fellow could fire. Grabbing his wrist, Denton bent the arm backward, twisting it with such power that the weapon dropped to the ground. Kicking fiercely, Beaumont flung the gun across the hard packed earth beyond possible reach.

He was no fighter by choice, but he didn't lack courage, and against Murray he rallied all his forces. It was an ugly battle, a heavy slugging against flesh with no holds nor blows barred. Round and around they went, panting and slamming at each other. Beaumont was quick and ruthless, but Denton fought with a cold fury of a determination that brooked no defeat. He feinted, then caught Beaumont a clip under the ear followed by another slashing blow that laid him flat.

Before Beaumont could scramble up, he was down again, face in the dust, Murray's knee in the small of his back.

"I'll beat you to a pulp," Denton threatened, "or you'll take back all the damn lies you've told about me!"

Beaumont writhed helplessly.

Grasping his hair, Denton slammed down the blond head. "More?" he asked. "Or will you say what I tell you?"

There was a gurgling, almost inaudible acquiescence.

Murray turned his face. "Repeat after me," he commanded, "I'm a dirty liar. Murray Denton fired me for cheating and lying to him."

Mumblingly, but still distinguishable, the words came from Beaumont's bruised lips, while Richards listened with pallid face and stricken eyes.

"What about the bulls?" Murray demanded.

"I brought 'em over," was the mumbled reply.

"Want anything more of him, Mister Richards?" Denton asked.

"No, no," the Professor half gasped. "He must leave the ranch at once. I will forfeit the five hundred dollars that was to be his should I ever break our agreement. I'll give him a check at once."

"All right, get up, Alibi." Murray said grimly. "You sure found one time when you couldn't talk yourself outa a mess. And I'll leave you a lot worse off than you are now, if I ever catch you running loose over this country again."

Getting to his feet, he wiped his face vigorously with the bandana that had been about his neck.

"How shall I ever apologize," Richards said haltingly. "I—I—"

"Never mind sayin' any more," Murray broke in. "That bird has fooled plenty of good men—had me kinda blinded for a while once. Forget it, and let's start all over."

"What about that check?" Beaumont rasped. "Here I've been workin' my brains out for you and I get beat up and kicked off the place with only a measly five hundred dollars. For two cents I'd take you to court, Richards."

"You'll take nobody any place," Murray growled and Alibi Ed subsided to an indistinguishable muttering as he followed Richards to the house.

"You've skinned your hand and your head is bleeding," Marcella told Murray. "Come, I'm going to put on some dressings."

"I'm sorry I sprung that fight in front of you," he said apologetically. "Honest, I couldn't help it."

"I should think not," Marcella exclaimed. "And I wouldn't have missed seeing it for anything. The way you wiped him out, it was wonderful! Ever since that other day you were here, I've been doubting him more and more.

The way he lied about you—oh, he didn't get half of what he deserved to get!"

"My, my, I didn't dream you were such a fierce-tempered little girl," Murray laughed.

"I'm—I'm not," Marcella's breath caught on a sudden sob. "I was really terribly frightened, even while I wanted you to whip him."

"Then you wouldn't object to having somebody around to—er—sort of take care of you?"

"I—I'd love it," she said softly, "That is, if he was a cowboy with black hair and blue eyes—and he owned the Cross D."

"And—would you—could you learn to like him a lot?" Murray asked, wondering if the light in her eyes could really be true.

"I do now," she said softly.

Murray's arms were about her only a second when a voice called, "Marcella, come here this minute."

She laughed, with her face against his breast, then murmured, "You come, too; we've got to convince Mother that it's the proper thing for you to hug me."

"That shouldn't be hard," Murray declared. "We'll just remind her that the Good Book says 'Love thy neighbor.'"

Going Hunting?

REVISED GAME-LAWS for 1941-2 for the United States and Canada

in the current issue of

Field & Stream

Don't go hunting this fall and winter for any kind of game without consulting the game laws first. It's the only way to avoid trouble. The laws of your State and of every other State and of every Province of Canada are published for your guidance and protection in this month's issue of Field & Stream. Only 15c at all the better newssdealers.

Taming of the Shrewd

By Cliff Walters

The goal that Bob Loring kept in mind through years of hardship and struggle was a girl's blue eyes and the light of love he hoped to kindle there some day.

I

EARS flattened back, nostrils flaring, the roan team was running like a pair of greyhounds toward the ranch buildings on the bank of Cradle Creek. If lanky Bob Loring held the lines, he wasn't doing much driving. He was too busy trying to steady the man in the seat beside him, an elderly man whose neck had been torn by a bullet.

Grim, tight-lipped, Bob Loring glanced back. The trio of riders were still coming; still yelling like wild Indians, and still shooting. A bullet whined so close to Bob's blond head that he ducked a little. Then he saw the buildings of the L Bar ranch ahead.

He slapped the hard-running team with the lines and said:

"Buck up, Uncle Tim. Just ahead of us. . . ." His voice trailed off, was lost in the mêlée of thudding hoofs, yells and gunshots. He could see men coming out of the strange ranch house ahead.

A bullet caught the near horse in the leg as the team swerved around that last bend. The horse staggered, fell. The buckboard, already lurching dangerously, struck the fallen horse. Spinning wheels, spraying dust that was like red smoke against the sunset, twisted in the air and landed amid sagebrush and rock.

Bob Loring landed on his head and shoulders, lay there stunned. Then he stirred and said, "Uncle Tim!" And touched the elderly man who lay nearby.

"No use, kid," said a voice that sounded far off. "He was dead before you had the upset."

Bob could see several men there now. The boss and the punchers of the L Bar—and big Hugh Blainey, one of the trio who had pursued the buckboard from town.

Blainey was grinning. That twisted grin of his goaded Bob Loring. Goaded him into staggering to his feet and lunging at the big man. Blainey laughed shortly, slapped his ineffectual attacker.

"Keep your paws off him!" piped up a girl's voice. "He—that boy there—didn't gyp you out of any money, did he, Blainey?"

The man Blainey didn't answer but slim Dave Allison said to his daughter, "Of course not, Cathie, but that wouldn't stop Blainey from killin' the kid. Get out, Blainey! Take Sam Brink and Joel Gurdette with you. Your business is done, ain't it? You wanted to kill a crooked gambler who took the three of you to a trimmin', didn't you? Well, you've killed him — deader'n hell!"

Maybe it was the knowledge that his uncle was dead, maybe it was the effects of the hard fall he'd taken that made Bob Loring weave a little. Cathie Allison, a dark-haired girl with very red lips and big, hazel eyes, took his arm, steadied him. Bob looked at his Uncle Tim, and his blue eyes blurred.

"Take the lad up to the house, give him some supper," said Dave Allison, owner of the L Bar, to his young daughter. "Me and the boys'll tend to—well, what needs tendin' to."

"I'm stayin' with Uncle Tim!" Bob said defiantly, and jerked away from the sympathetic girl.

"Listen, kid," said Dave Allison. "Even if Blainey and his two saloon-loafin' pals didn't have any business takin' the law into their own hands, the world didn't lose much when it lost Tim Loring. He was what Blainey called him—a crooked gambler. I saw Tim Loring playin' cards down at Bendville the other night. I didn't like the way he shuffled and dealt cards, even if he was too smooth to show what he was doin'."

"You think Blainey or Gurdette or Sam Brink wouldn't cheat?" Bob countered bitterly, trying to control his voice and quivering lips. "They just wasn't fast enough to gyp Uncle Tim. That's what riled 'em. That's why they chased him outa town and murdered him."

"Maybe," agreed Dave Allison gently. "But, just the same, old Tim Loring was a—"

"He was my uncle, and he always treated me right. He's taken care of me ever since I was four years old. And he's allus been crippled up in the legs. He couldn't work. If he cheated at cards, maybe it was because I'd be able to eat!"

"Don't try to justify cheatin', kid," said Dave Allison gently. "All you can do for Tim Loring now is to bury him. I'll help you out on that. See that knoll across the crick over there. Well. . . ."

Bob Loring couldn't see anything. Nor could he shake Cathie Allison's hand off his arm. Determinedly she held him, and eventually she got him

started toward the house. Blindly he stumbled along. Then Cathie's mother, a frail little woman, came out on the porch and helped her daughter get the grief-stricken lad into the house.

The next day they buried the old card sharpster. And that night Dave Allison said, "You're stayin' here for a while, Bob Loring. You're grown enough to hold down a job now. You'll get good grub and some wages—whatever you're worth."

"Is it a go, Bob?" asked Cathie eagerly.

"I—I don't know." Bob didn't want to stay. Nor did he want to leave. The seventeen-year-old didn't know what to do.

That night he decided to leave. He was mounting the saddleless roan horse when a shadow moved from the grove of cottonwoods near the barn. It was Cathie, fifteen, slim, pretty.

"Please don't, Bob," she said. And her voice was choked with tears.

"I'm not askin' charity, no more'n Uncle Tim ever did!" he said gruffly.

"It won't be charity," she said. "You'll earn what you get here. If you're a man, or want to be, you'll stay here and work. If you want to end up like your Uncle Tim—well, start traipsin' over the country!"

"Why should *you* care?" he countered. "Why are you out here traipsin' around at this time of night?"

"Because I think more of you than I do a little sleep," she answered, meeting his eyes resolutely. "Turn that horse back in the pasture now, Bob. Please!"

He did. And the next morning he went to work—hauling hay from the meadow up to the barn. For a month it was that way—hard work, good meals, and finally fifteen dollars pay. One dollar of that pay went to buy a box of candy for Cathie. Timidly, after riding back from town, Bob made his way toward the moonlit porch where Cathie was sitting alone.

"Hello, Bob," she said unsteadily.

"What's wrong, Cathie?" he asked. "What's them two trunks doin' here on the porch."

"Mother and I are leaving the ranch tomorrow morning," she said. "This altitude's too high for Mother's heart, the doctor says. She's going back East to live with her folks a while—till she's well—and I'm going with her. Dad can't go."

"Aw, gosh!" Bob groaned. "You—you might be gone all fall—and winter!"

"You'll take good care of Dad while I'm gone, Bob? And write me once in a while?" She was trying to smile, but the young man could see big tear drops glistening on her long, pretty lashes.

"I—I can't write, Cathie," he admitted miserably. "Traipsin' around with Uncle Tim, I didn't get no schoolin' and—"

"Oh!" She gasped a little. "That's terrible!"

"Is it?" he said, embarrassed. Then he blurted, "Here's some candy for you to—to eat on the train. Good-by, Cathie."

"Good-by, Bob." She held out a warm, trembling little hand. "Think about me once in a while."

"I'll be thinkin' about you most of the time, I guess."

"Why, Bob!"

"So long, Cathie." Husky-voiced, he turned away abruptly and headed for the bunkhouse. The other punchers were in bed and asleep—that is, until Bob stumbled over Rusty Clark's bootjack and fell down. He sprawled across a bunk and wakened Pete Parshall who had been peacefully snoring.

"Aw, hell!" rumbled Pete, a gangling six-footer. "That damned kid! Makin' more commotion than a stampede goin' through a hardware store. It's time he was learnin' some bunkhouse etty-kette."

"Correct," said Deacon Chadwick, a bald, middle-aged little puncher with an education and a mysterious past. "Rusty and I shall help you do the honors, Pete. Grab your chaps!"

Bob struggled, but his punishment

was inevitable. Those leather chaps swung by Pete Parshall plopped loudly to the seat of the young man's overalls, while moonlight slanted through the small window of the bunkhouse.

"There," said Deacon Chadwick at last. "Let that be a lesson to you, Robert Loring."

If Bob stung a little, the punishment inflicted by chaps didn't gall him like the thought of Cathie's leaving Cradle Valley. Long after the other men were asleep, Bob lay there staring up at the ceiling boards of the bunkhouse.

II

BOB didn't see Cathie and her mother leave the next morning. He and Deacon Chadwick had left the ranch early, had ridden up the slope of the nearby mountain to patch a broken drift fence. It was about noon when Deacon grinned and said, "You look as lost as a crippled duck on the Painted Desert, Bob. What's burdening your youthful heart? Cathie's sudden departure?"

"Why should I care about—"

"You do, anyhow. So don't deny it."

"How long does it take to learn to read and write, Deacon?"

"Ah! I smell smoke from the spark of ambition!" said the little bald man, grinning. "Listen, handsome. If—"

"Don't call me handsome!"

"Why not? You are, kid. But about that learning to read business. You and I are slated to ride winter range at the cabin out on Dry Creek this winter. That's what the boss told me. Well, I might teach you how to read something besides brands and earmarks—that is, if you'd do the cooking, wash the dishes and get up and build the fire every morning. That old cabin out there's colder than hell, though."

"I'll do it!" Bob said eagerly.

"Oh, sure! That's what you say now. But when you find out that study is real work, you'll change your mind."

Bob didn't change his mind. When he and Deacon moved out to the Dry Creek cabin late that fall, Bob had some school books in the grub wagon and an ample supply of coal oil for the lamp. Tired after riding all day in the cold wind that blustered its chill breath across the great salt sage flats and ridges where the L Bar dry stuff foraged, Deacon Chadwick wanted to go to bed early. Yet Bob insisted on instruction. And he kept up his end of the bargain. He did the cooking, the dish washing; got up in the frosty cabin and built the fire every morning.

Deacon was a good teacher, if a little blunt and profane at times. Then the little puncher began taking more and more interest in his pupil and fellow puncher. He was astonished at the way Bob learned, and at the way he remembered. One night Deacon said:

"Why the hell are you going to all this trouble, Bob?"

"Because," came the reply, "Cathie—well, she said it was terrible about me not bein' able to read and write."

"Listen, handsome," said Deacon. "Learning to read and write is a sensible move. But be careful about trying to ride a slick-shod horse of hope too far up the high mountain of dreams. You might take quite a fall."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there are lots of handsome young bucks back East. And Cathie's mother is an Easterner at heart. Now don't let your jaw drop like a hot horseshoe. I'm just telling you something for your own good."

"I know, Deacon," said the younger man. "But I'm still goin' to read and write!"

"Yeah, and I'm going to take a couple days off starting tomorrow," said the other. "I've got some business over at Boomtown, thirty miles south of here."

"I know." Bob smiled. "You got to see how many drinks make a pint, eh?"

"You're getting smarter all the time," said Deacon. "Well, you've got a damned good instructor, boy. Think you can look after the dogies for a

couple days? And if the boss should happen along, tell him I had to have a tooth pulled?"

Deacon was gone four days. It was on that fourth day that Bob, trying to do two men's work, came back to the cabin for dinner and a change of horses pretty late. He was glad when he saw smoke rising from the cabin stove pipe. He thought Deacon was back. Yet, when he stepped into that cabin, he saw it was another man who had cooked his dinner and was now preparing to ride away.

That sight of that man, Sam Brink—he was one of the trio who had pursued old Tim Loring from Bendville that fateful day—brought a rush of hate throbbing through Bob Loring's veins. Brink, pale-eyed, fairly husky, grinned and said, "Well, if it ain't old card sharp Loring's hard-working nephew! Looks like you're growin' up and fillin' out a little, Bub."

"And it looks like you're startin' away without washin' them dishes you dirtied, Brink."

"You can wash 'em, Bub. Well, thanks for the grub."

Brink started past the younger man in the cabin doorway, but Bob didn't budge. Blue eyes as frosty as the wind out there on winter range, Bob said, "Get back there and wash them—those dishes, Brink!"

"Why, you damned tramp!" roared the older man. "Since when can a damned coyote of the Loring pack r'ar up and start yelpin' at a *man?*" He tried to brush Bob aside, but the minute he laid a hand on the younger man, he took a blow to the side of his head.

Brink swore, lashed out with a furious fist that glanced off Bob's cheek bone. And from then on it was give and take. If Bob took the punishment of fists, he also gave it. He smashed a right hook into Brink's ribs, belted him with a slashing blow to the nose. And barely dodged a haymaker that might have knocked him cold.

Brink rushed and landed a blow to Bob's stomach. But the older man, the gambler of Bendville, was jarred badly with a solid smash to the mouth. He was bleeding from both nose and mouth now, was puffing under the exertion and those blows that landed to his body. He drew back for another haymaker, but before he could throw it, Bob had landed again with a savage uppercut to the jaw.

Brink rocked back on his boot heels, fell and struck the back of his neck against the edge of the hot stove. He yelled hoarsely and twisted off onto the floor. He leaped to his feet again. He was insanely mad now, and goaded to further fury by that searing brand across his none-too-clean neck.

Bob was the cooler of the two. He was deadly cool—and remembering that day when his uncle had taken a bullet through the neck. Probably a bullet from Sam Brink's gun. Bob Loring feinted with a left jab, crossed a vicious right to the jaw of Brink again. Brink reeled a little, tried to catch his balance. Before he could, that right of Bob's was landing again. This time Brink's knees buckled. He went down on his hands and knees, the blood from his face dripping on the plank floor.

"Get up and wash them — those dishes!" Bob commanded. He grabbed the water bucket, dumped its content over the head of the other man.

Brink got up, started taking off his coat. Then he noticed another man standing in the doorway. It was Deacon Chadwick, back from his spree over at Boomtown.

"I'd have bet a ten-dollar bill you couldn't do it, kid," Deacon said to Bob, and grinned. "But you sure as hell did. Brink weighs twenty pounds more than you do, and he's had experience. He has to fight pretty often. Anyone does that plays cards like he does."

"Crow, damn you!" mumbled Brink through puffing lips. "Wait'll you two buzzards come to Bendville again!"

"You and your pal Blainey—and Gurdette, maybe—will make it hot for us, eh?" chuckled Deacon. "Well, if young Bob Loring's along with me, I'll

take a chance. He should have kicked your damned brains out—if any—while you were down, Brink. Treated you like you treated his uncle. Yeah, I was at the L Bar that evening you and two other coyotes murdered old Tim Loring. Hurry up with those dishes. And wash 'em clean!"

To Bob, Deacon said, "Pick up that gun of Brink's, kid. And keep it."

"Like hell he will!" Brink made a dive for the gun on the floor. He grabbed it, started to arc it up at the two men near the doorway. Bob didn't see Deacon move. It wasn't until Deacon's gun roared and Brink pitched over on his face that Bob was aware that Deacon had pulled and fired.

Bob Loring tensed. He was speechless. It was Deacon who drawled, "We'll have to wash that buzzard's dirty dishes after all, kid."

They unsaddled and turned Sam Brink's bay horse loose. Deacon said, "Keep your chin up, kid. It was him or us. We'll roll him in one of those fresh cowhides, skid him across the snow for a couple of miles and plant him."

"But hadn't we ought to go back to the ranch, tell the boss—or somebody—what's happened?"

"Did Brink and his pals worry about funeral arrangements for your uncle?"

"No," Bob growled. "Let's plant him!"

"You have to watch those guns, kid," said Deacon reprovingly. "That's more important sometimes than learning to read and write. Well, Dave Allison furnished me with plenty of ammunition for this winter job. Maybe a few gun lessons wouldn't hurt you any."

"Maybe not, Deacon."

III

THAT night Deacon said, "I wish I wouldn't try to gamble when I'm drunk like I did over at Boomtown. When I'm sober I know better. Say, kid! Didn't your old uncle ever teach you any good card tricks all those years?"

"Yes," said Bob tensely. "But I won't teach 'em to you, Deacon. You'd try to use 'em, make a bobble—and somebody'd—well, do to you what they did to Uncle Tim."

"Aw, hell!" Deacon said. "I brought a deck of cards from town along with that new pair of mittens for you. Show me what you know about handling cards, kid."

"No," said Bob. "I know too much about 'em. If I'd show you the tricks Uncle Tim learned—taught me, you'd be tryin' 'em. And wind up like Uncle Tim did."

"Show me, or no more reading and writing lessons!"

"You can't do that, Deacon. We made a bargain. I've kept mine. And you'll keep yours—won't you?"

"Hell, yes," said the little man grinning. "You're not over the shock of your uncle's death yet, kid. You're scared of cards. But you weren't scared of Sam Brink. Damn, man! You hit like a mule kicks. But why not? Look at those shoulders. You're gettin' taller, broader above the waist! But listen, kid. Be damned careful if you ever ride into Bendville alone. It's just possible that Hugh Blainey and Joel Gurdette know about where their pal, Brink, was today. They steal a few horses, you know, when gambling business gets too dull to pay their liquor bills."

Thoughtlessly Bob picked up the deck of cards that Deacon had placed on the table. Thinking of Brink, Bob started manipulating that deck of cards—manipulating them with all the speed, the ease and skill that Tim Loring had taught him. Deacon's envious eyes glowed as he watched the dexterity of those two deceivingly big, raw-boned hands.

"Do that again, Bob! That last trick—pulling the second card!" urged Deacon.

Unaware that he had done it, Bob tossed the cards aside and got up. "I forgot I was even monkeyin' with the damn things!" he growled.

"You're a fool, Bob. Out here freezing yourself to death when you could be sitting in warm saloons making a fortune over poker tables."

"I'd rather freeze!"

"Yeah, because you can't get over ridin' the rimrocks of hell with a gambling uncle! Or is it because a girl with a pair of hazel eyes smiled at you and talked you out of running away from the L Bar?"

"How do you know about that night Cathie came out and—"

"I know a lot of things, handsome."

"What was—what were you doin' 'fore you started punchin' cows?"

"I've forgotten the past," said Deacon soberly. "And I contemplate the future without too much elation or hope. Now that you have my complete history, let's forget it."

"Sure," said Bob, embarrassed. "I can spell every damned word on page twenty-nine of that spellin' book."

"Let's hear you," said Deacon. And, having listened to the spelling, he said, "Nice work, Willie Jones. You may go to the head of the class if you'll buy me a pint of whiskey instead of a big red apple."

BOB was glad to see spring come after that hard winter. But he was sorry to learn that Dave Allison had run short of hay for the weaker cattle at the ranch. Losses had been heavy. Dave hadn't been able to go back East for Christmas, as he had planned. And Mrs. Allison was no better. She couldn't come home this summer. She and Cathie were going down to some ocean resort for the summer.

Bob kept on studying alone when he had time, but there wasn't much time for study out there on the spring roundup. Then there were other jobs to be done.

Beef roundup in October. The long beef herd strung out through the Indian summer haze, and trailing lazily toward the empty cars on the siding at the Bendville loading pens. Dave Allison told his punchers that he wouldn't be right back from Omaha. He was going East to visit his wife and daughter.

Allison, who apparently missed his family very much, was just getting on the caboose when Bob Loring handed him a little box and asked that he give it to Cathie.

"It ain't much," said the L Bar's youngest puncher shyly. "Just a little jasper arrowhead I found up by Black Butte. I sent it away, had it fixed with a gold chain so it could be worn like a locket."

"Still remember Cathie, do you?" said Dave Allison. "Well, she'll appreciate your thoughtfulness, Bob. I'll do my best to see if she can't come home next summer."

"I sure hope she does. My best regards to Mrs. Allison, too, Dave."

"Thanks, Bob. So long."

The long string of cattle cars began to roll. It was Deacon Chadwick who said, "Let's have a look at this town, Bob. Wash the dust out of our throats with a glass of beer."

They and the other two punchers, Rusty and Pete, went over to the saloon, lined up at the bar. Bob looked in the mirror at the backbar and watched some men playing poker over in the corner. One of them, the big, red-faced man with the flinty gray eyes, was Hugh Blainey. Another player was squat, one-eyed Joel Gurdette. Gurdette saw a lot with that one eye, apparently. He saw the bone-handled gun slung in Bob Loring's holster. Pretty soon Gurdette and Blainey walked toward the bar. It was Blainey who confronted Bob and said:

"Where did you get the bone-handled gun, Loring?"

Those words jarred. But Bob's expression didn't change as he turned around. It was Deacon Chadwick who said, "I gave Bob Loring that gun. Why?"

"It looks kinda familiar to us," said Joel Gurdette in that low, throaty tone of his. "Where did *you* get it, Chadwick?"

"I can't quite remember."

"You'd better remember!" Blainey growled, bristling. "That gun belonged to Sam Brink and—"

"Whatever became of Sam?" asked Deacon blandly. "I never see him around Bendville any more." Deacon wore a strange smile, Bob noticed. And his hand was close to his gun.

"If the damn card shark met his match somewhere, the world's better off," put in Pete Parshall, who had lost more than his share of money to the gambling trio of Bendville. "Well, what's eatin' you, Blainey? If you're goin' to make a grab for your gun, why don't you grab?"

"He's scared," said Deacon Chadwick tauntingly. "It's one thing to shoot an old man like Tim Loring in the back. It's something else to take a chance. Isn't that right, Blainey?"

"So the Bar L killed Sam Brink, eh?" Gurdette rumbled.

"Could you prove it?" said Deacon.

"Maybe," came the reply of the one-eyed gambler.

"Skin outa your chaps, Pete," said Deacon. "There's work to be done here."

Rusty Clark, a two-hundred pounder, and Bob were quick to take their cue. They leaped at Gurdette and Blainey. Gurdette hit Bob pretty hard, but it was Gurdette who went down under a blow to the face. Then Blainey was down. And Pete Parshall was wielding the chaps unmercifully. Saloon loafers, afraid of Blainey and Gurdette, howled their approval. Wildly, noisily the hard-swung chaps popped to the seats of overalls.

"Take their guns and let 'em up," Deacon finally called.

"We'll get other guns," growled Blainey, smarting under his dose of hot leather.

"Keep away from the L Bar with 'em or you'll get hurt," Deacon admonished. "Now get outa this saloon and let white men drink in peace and quiet. Scat, you skunks!"

They got out hurriedly. And Bob said, "Thanks for swingin' those chaps so hard, Rusty. The drinks are on me —and Uncle Tim!"

On the way back to the ranch that night, Deacon told Rusty and Pete just how Bob had come to possess the bone-handled gun. "And Bob can use it, too. I saw to that," Deacon concluded.

"Nobody could show him better'n you," said Rusty Clark, grinning as he led Dave Allison's saddled horse back home. "Well, I'll bet Gurdette and Blainey couldn't bear settin' in a saddle the way we are." Hardly were those words out of his mouth when the lead rope swung under the tail of the big black horse Rusty was riding.

The big black snorted, sailed high in a twisting leap. Caught unawares, Rusty swayed in his saddle. The next jump he was thrown. While Pete Parshall chased and caught the black horse, Deacon Chadwick grinned down at Rusty and drawled, "What was that you were saying about sitting comfortably in your saddle?"

"Aw, go to hell!" Rusty grumbled, dusting off his overalls. "Give me a swig out of that bottle, Deacon."

IV

HEN Dave Allison returned home, he seemed depressed. His wife wasn't at all well. Cathie had wanted to come home, but couldn't leave her mother. Dave Allison talked about selling the Bar L and going back East to live, but cattle prices were low just now.

Deacon and Bob went back to winter range again in December. More and more often Deacon rode over to Boomtown. One evening Dave Allison, looking tired and worried rode up to the winter range cabin and asked Bob where his pard was.

"In Boomtown, gettin' a tooth pulled," said Bob.

"Don't lie to me!" Allison snapped. "He's been seen over there several

times this winter. Yeah, there he comes now!"

It was Deacon, all right. Getting home after an absence of two days. Allison lit in on his bald-headed rider, was going to fire him; but Bob timidly pleaded the cause of the man who had taught him to read and write and had, perhaps, saved him from Sam Brink's gun that day a year ago.

"Shut up!" Allison glared at Bob. "This is a two-man job out here. If you're jackass enough to try doin' it alone while Deacon's on a spree in town, maybe I'd ought to fire you, too."

"Before you fire us both," said Deacon, "let's all have a drink out of this bottle I brought. It's colder'n hell today."

"Give me a drink!" said Allison. He took two or three big drinks. He seemed to feel better, but he was more talkative than Bob had ever seen him before. Those drinks on an empty stomach kicked Dave Allison hard. He talked about his troubles. Told about the high cost of hiring heart specialists for his wife. Not that he begrudged a nickel of that money. It was just that the money seemed wasted so far as his wife's condition was concerned.

Bob realized now why so many fat dry cows had been shipped with the steers last October. Allison was under heavy expense. Allison was lonely and worried about his wife. Deacon produced another bottle, and he and Dave Allison got drunk that night.

It wasn't the last night Allison got drunk. After that, Bob heard, the owner of the L Bar rode often to Bendville, and Bob blamed Deacon for plying the boss with drinks that night in the cabin.

"Well, we didn't get fired, did we?" Deacon countered. "Besides, Dave needs to let down once in a while."

"He'll get down if he keeps hittin' the booze," Bob replied. "What would Cathie think if she knew her—"

"She's having enough fun spending L Bar money, no doubt," said Deacon. "Do you suppose that pretty girl's worrying about her dad as much as you're worrying about her?"

"What makes you think I'm worryin' about her?"

"She's on your mind," said Deacon. "Did she ever write and thank you for that arrowhead you had fixed up for her?"

"She thinks I can't read."

"Then she's wrong, kid. I notice you read all the books you can get your hands on and save your money like a miser. Why?"

"Because some day I'm goin' to have a place of my own and—"

"Earning it the hard way, eh? Why don't you make it fast and easy. The way I saw you handle a deck of cards one night—"

"Cards, hell! I wouldn't make it that way!"

"And they call me Deacon," moaned the little man.

SEASONS slipped by. One day Dave Allison told Bob that he wanted him to homestead Wheel Springs. "You're twenty-one now, Bob," said the worried rancher. "And I've heard that Hugh Blainey's got his eye on that water out there."

"But why should he—"

"Sheepmen are crowding toward this valley. And there's rumors that a purebred Hereford outfit want a segregated range. I want to grab that Wheel Springs land. Can't you do that much for me?"

"Sure I can, Dave. And I will."

"You understand that you're taking it for me?"

"I savvy, Dave."

That's the way it was. Bob Loring glad to do anything he could for the man who had done so much for him—and perhaps to do it for Cathie. One summer Cathie came home, but only for a few days. Bob was up on the mountain cutting logs for his homestead cabin. He didn't see the girl.

"How did she look, Deacon?" asked the disappointed young man when Deacon rode by Wheel Springs one day.

"She didn't look exactly lonesome," growled Deacon. "She had a girl friend from the East with her and the girl friend's handsome brother, Jeff Tyler."

"Oh, I see!"

"And it hurts, doesn't it, kid? Well, go ahead with your cabin. But don't you bother to build a nursery room in it."

"Aw, go to hell, will you?"

"If I don't quit drinking—yeah," said Deacon. "I'm getting to be almost as much of a soak as Dave Allison. He could hardly keep sober while Cathie was here."

"Didn't he borrow some money a while ago, Deacon?"

"So I hear. But that's his business, kid. Well, keep your handsome blue eyes open. Rusty and Pete saw Blainey and Gurdette riding L Bar range the other day. I guess Gurdette doesn't like the idea of your taking up this homestead. He wanted it for some reason."

But it wasn't Gurdette and Blainey who bothered Bob Loring. It was an Eastern dude named Jeff Tyler. After all, Cathie would be nineteen now. Perhaps she would be getting married. . . .

That thought bothered Bob a lot. He had built too many dream castles with Cathie in them. Oh, he had no right to. He knew that. Cathie had only been sympathetic toward a homeless kid plunged into an abyss of tragedy that evening four years ago. A homeless kid who couldn't even read and write. Maybe if he were to write her a letter. . . .

No, that wouldn't do any good. Cathie lived in a different world now. Very likely she would stay in the East.

Glumly Bob Loring drove the running gears of a wagon up the mountain and into the patch of timber where he had cut logs. He was loading logs on that wagon when he heard a twig snap behind him. He turned, saw Joel Gurdette standing there holding a gun.

"Hello, Loring," said the one-eyed man. "How would you like a dose of the same medicine you and Deacon Chadwick give Sam Brink?"

"The same medicine," said Bob, "that you and Blainey and Brink gave my uncle, eh?"

"Yeah, that's it! All right, Hugh."

Bob started to face big Hugh Blainey, but a pine club caught him across the side of the head, knocked him against the wagon wheel.

Half-dazed, he could feel angry hands grasping at him, could hear angry voices saying: "What happened to Brink, Loring? Tell us or—"

They hit him, kicked him, roweled him with their spurs. And still he didn't talk. Then they tied his hands, quirted him along a steep trail that led to an old trapper cabin in Big Canyon.

"You'll tell us all about Brink," said Gurdette.

"I killed him when he tried to kill me," said Bob at last. His mouth was so battered he could barely talk, yet he tried to save Deacon from the vengeance of this pair of wolves.

"I thought so!" growled Blainey. It's kinda dangerous, Loring, killin' a friend of mine. Still, we might let you off at that, if you'll do us a triflin' favor."

"Meanin'?" said Bob.

"That you'll sign over a relinquishment on the Wheel Springs homestead to Joel here. We can use that land."

"Yeah? What sheepman wants to buy it from you?"

"That's our business. But you'll sign some papers, all right. There's a lawyer from Boomtown waitin' at the Big Canyon cabin. He'll fix things legal, all right."

"He'll play hell gettin' my signature on a paper."

"He'll get it one way or another," Blainey sneered.

They got rougher after that, the pair of Bendville gamblers. They knocked their prisoner into the cold water of Canyon Creek, dragged him out, threw him in again. They almost drowned him. Finally they dragged him up to the cabin where Fred Copeland, a drunken lawyer from Boomtown, waited.

"Better sign, kid," said the lawyer.

"It'll save you a lot of grief. Maybe save you your life. Of course, we could get rid of you, and Joel here could file on Wheel Springs instead, but—"

"But that might look kinda crude, eh?" Bob growled, battered and bruised, but still defiant. "It'll look crude, anyway, if you—"

"Not too crude," said Copeland complacently. "I'll see that proper witnesses escort you out of the country. Anyhow, you're breaking the law. You're homesteading property for hire! You're violating the intent of the homestead act plainly, inasmuch as you're—"

"Go to hell, you drunken sot! I've heard about you!"

"Let's carve him up with a knife!" Gurdette rumbled furiously and made a move toward Bob.

"Not that," said Copeland, who was engineering the sheep deal with a company that needed more and better range. "Just handle this my way—at least, until we get him out of this country, boys. Just take him outdoors and set him down. But don't let him sleep. Take turns at keeping him awake. That'll work fine eventually. I know!"

"You're the boss—till we get him outa the country," said Blainey. "After that, me and Joel here'll tend to him ourselves."

Half-frozen from the mountain air and wet clothing, Bob Loring decided to last as long as he could. There *might* be a chance of an L Bar rider finding that team tied up there in the timber. A remote chance at best, but still a chance.

Yet that first night seemed like an eternity. Numb with cold, Bob wanted to doze off. Then either Blainey or Gurdette would kick him awake or make him walk around. He was hungry, thirsty, half-sick from the punishment inflicted on him; yet he would not sign a relinquishment on the Wheel Springs homestead, to which dreams as well as loyalty made him cling tenaciously, come what might.

V

ALL that following day he was guarded and kept awake; tormented and goaded by men who wanted his signature before they wanted his life—the same signature that he had made when filing his homestead application. Bob worried about the team tied in the timber. He begged his captors to go back to that patch of timber and untie that team—either that or kill them.

"Don't worry about them horses. Worry about yourself," said Hugh Blainey, enjoying things apparently. "You ain't lookin' quite so handsome today, Mr. Loring. You look a little peeked. And you ain't grinnin' like you was that night you and those other L Bar coyotes came after me and Joel in the saloon."

"I wish I'd killed you both that night," said Bob.

"Don't you, though!" hooted Gurdette. "Too bad, Hugh, that old Sam Brink ain't here to see Loring squirm in his torture. Sam could still laugh at that—even if he's in hell!"

The afternoon wore on and wore on Bob Loring's nerves. With the coming of dusk, a great weariness came to the tortured puncher. He wondered how much longer he could hold out.

"Why don't you take the prisoner for a little walk before it gets dark, Joel?" said old Fred Copeland, angry at Bob's determination. "Up along the rim of the canyon would be a good place. And keep him walking close to the rim. I think a little walk up there would change his mind about signing our little document. I want to get back to town."

"And your troughful of booze, eh, you damned swine?" said Bob, his tongue so dry and swollen he could hardly talk.

"Start walking up that trail with him," Copeland commanded Gurdette. "If he stumbles and falls over the can-

yon rim—well, that's hardly our fault."

Wearily, almost exhausted Bob climbed that steep trail, and wondered if he could make it. Maybe the sting of that rawhide quirt in Gurdette's hand helped some. At last the top of the rim was gained and Bob stumbled along close to the brink, with his hands still tied and with Gurdette crowding him dangerously near the edge.

"Enjoyin' things?" Gurdette sneered. "Awful deep down there, ain't it? And —woop! You *nearly* went over that time, Mr. Loring. You—"

With a desperate hate in his heart, and forcing strength into his body, Bob jumped and kicked all at the same time. Kicked Gurdette hard in the left side. The big man yelled, swayed dangerously at the brink of the canyon. Again Bob Loring kicked him—and Gurdette disappeared. There was a moment of silence. Then a sound came up from the bottom of Big Canyon in which darkness had already gathered.

Bob Loring began to run for the nearest patch of timber. It was a fierce elation that drove his muscles, the knowledge that Joel Gurdette had landed amid the granite rocks. But Bob didn't head back toward his team. He headed in the general direction of a prospector's camp over on Granite Creek. He missed the use of his hands in climbing. He could hear the gurgle of a little spring trickling from a crevice. He flung himself against the cold water. But he drank sparingly, even though nothing had ever tasted quite so good.

Just before dawn the next morning, Bob Loring stumbled into the prospecting camp of old Barth Donahue. And Donahue, rising from his muggy blankets, growled: "Good gosh, man! Who the—what the—"

"The ropes on my wrists—cut 'em!" Bob begged.

And Barth Donahue quickly cut them. Then the prospector brewed some strong black coffee to warm Bob's body.

"Wake me up in a couple hours, Barth," said Bob, and slumped across old Donahue's blankets. "There's a couple men . . . I've got . . . to kill." He was asleep, motionless as a dead man.

Donahue didn't know what was wrong, but the prospector, rifle leaning beside him, stood vigil for several hours over the sleeping man. At last a rider hove into sight, and Donahue said in a low voice:

"Loring! Loring!"

Bob jerked up to a sitting position, saw that rider. Then he said, "Put your gun down, Barth. It's Dave Allison."

Allison it was and faunching mad because the team he had loaned Bob, a gentle old team, had come trailing home with gaunted flanks and broken harness dragging on the ground.

"What the hell happened?" Allison stormed. "Did you pull a Deacon Chadwick, go off on a toot while—"

"Shut up, Allison!" growled Barth Donahue. "This kid suffered a damn sight more'n your precious team did. Tell him about it, Bob. And tell me, too."

Bob told his story, and Allison's attitude underwent swift change. "Copeland . . . Gurdette . . . Blainey!" he said. "Hell! There was nobody in Big Canyon when I came through there. Not a soul."

"Did you expect 'em to set around and wait till I got back there with a gun?" Bob retorted angrily. "I'm goin' to Boomtown, Dave. I'm takin' Deacon with me, if he'll go."

"Don't do that," Allison said after a moment's reflection. "That Copeland, drunkard or not, is a smooth one. Him and Blainey will be expectin' you if they're in Boomtown. You'll be askin' Deacon to lay down his life for you."

"Then I'll go alone!"

"You will like hell. You'll live to homestead Wheel Springs! We're goin' to the county seat, Bob. We're tellin' the law about this deal."

Eventually Allison had his way. At Morland, the county seat sixty miles

from Cradle Valley, the law was informed of what Bob Loring had suffered at Big Canyon. Warrants were issued for Fred Copeland and Hugh Blainey. But Copeland was crafty as a fox. He knew all the tricks. There was a trial; and somehow—probably because of Copeland's well coached witnesses—the jury got the impression that Bob Loring and Dave Allison and Barth Donahue had tried to frame Copeland and Blainey. The canyon story took on an atmosphere of unreality. Copeland and Blainey were exonerated—and Bob was ready to kill judge, jury and court-room spectators.

Defiantly he shouted, "If I can't get justice here, I'll get it outside of court. Listen, Judge! I'm homesteadin' that Wheel Springs land. I'm not sellin' it to anybody. And if I disappear suddenly, you'll know—even if you don't know truth from lies—that I've been killed by Copeland and Blainey!"

"You're in contempt of court!" growled the judge. "But I'll overlook your impulsiveness. You're to be placed under peace bond for a year, Loring. Now go back to your homestead."

Copeland winked at Blainey, and it was all Dave Allison and Deacon Chadwick could do to restrain Bob from leaping at the two men who had tortured him. They did restrain him, though, and eventually got him out of Morland.

"You promised to homestead, prove up on that land," Allison told him. "I'm holdin' you to that promise."

"Yeah," growled the young man, jaw set like jutting granite. "What the hell do you care what I went through at Big Canyon? As long as I hold your water hole for you while you're boozin' around squanderin' what you've already got. No wonder your daughter don't come home to see you!"

"Shut up!" Allison stormed.

"And you playin' poker down at Bendville with Hugh Blainey!" Bob went on. "Lettin' that damned crude-fingered crook take your money away from you."

"The law freed Blainey of your charge," Allison said stonily. "Maybe you did imagine a hell of a lot about that Big Canyon affair."

"All right, I lied about it. Made up the whole damned story!" Bob raged. "Forget it then. But I'm keepin' that homestead now, in spite of hell, high water and crooked lawyers. Yeah, and a damned boss that fell for the talk of the crooked lawyers. I'm through with you, Allison."

"You'll change your mind about that after you've cooled down," said Allison. "I know you've been through hell, kid. But you'll get over it. Remember, you're under peace bond for a year."

"I'm not," said Deacon Chadwick quietly.

Allison twisted in his saddle, glared at his rider. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that Bob Loring told the truth during his trial. And I'm stayin' with him! Down to my last damned bullet. I'm not yellow like you are, Allison. Just any kind of settlement that wins you Wheel Springs isn't good enough for me. And I wouldn't trade the friendship of Bob Loring for the whole damned, mortgaged L Bar!"

"You're not talkin' to me that way, Chadwick. You're fired. I'm givin' you your check right now."

"Good enough—if your check's still good," said Deacon. "No hard feelings, Allison. You've got a mighty sick wife on your mind. You're lonesome and you drink and gamble to escape that loneliness. But you're getting all mixed up. That trial mixed you up, like it mixed the jury up. I don't hate you. I only feel sorry for you. You've lost your way on the trail of life. Perhaps you'll lose the L Bar outfit, too, before many more years."

"You're not leavin' Cradle Valley, Deacon!" said Bob. "You're movin' up to my homestead."

"I was hoping you'd say that, kid," said Deacon. "I'd like to stick around for a while."

Dave Allison touched spurs to his

horse, rode on alone. Suddenly two other riders appeared crossing a ridge. Bob tensed in his saddle. And Deacon said, "Cathie! And her friend, Jeff Tyler!"

Bob heard the girl, who must have appeared at the ranch while her father was in Morland, yell: "Dad! Dear old Dad!"

The girl, born to the saddle, didn't wait for her horse to stop moving before she was on the ground and running to her father's outstretched arms.

"It's Cathie!" Bob Loring said in a low voice. "Gosh! Taller, prettier than a picture!" Impulsively he spurred his horse, loped in that direction.

Soon he was smiling and calling: "Hello, Cathie!"

The girl turned, stared. To her father she said, "Who's this chap, Dad?"

"Bob Loring," said Allison grudgingly. "Get on your horse, Cathie. Let's ride home. Hello, Jeff. Glad to see you back in Wyoming again!"

Allison clasped Jeff Tyler's hand. Then the trio rode away. Pretty soon Deacon reached the spot where Bob, like a graven image in his saddle, watched the disappearing trio.

"You can't blame her for not knowing you, kid," said Deacon gently. "You're taller, broader. You're a man now. She didn't remember you."

"As if it makes a lot of difference," said the younger man. "Well, she was wearin' that arrowhead around her neck. I—I guess she liked *that* all right."

"But I don't like the way this check's burning my pocket," said Deacon, grinning a little. "Let's ride back to Morland, kid. Dampen our throats with a few swigs of panther perspiration."

"Not me, Deacon. I might meet Copeland or Blainey. And I'd start shootin' sure as hell!"

"Well, do you mind if I go back and—"

"Go ahead, Deacon. You'll find better company back there than I am today. But come home as soon as you can."

"I'll be there sooner or later." Deacon whirled his horse, rode back toward the county seat.

Bob trailed on alone. Occasionally he glimpsed a girl and two men riding ahead. The sagebrush blurred with the vision of dark, tumbled hair wreathing the face of a girl, the prettiest face Bob had ever looked upon. But Cathie didn't even remember the man who had seen her face, her dark, long-lashed eyes, in the smoke of campfires, in the waters of range streams, in the skies of starry nights. A man who had worshiped her, from afar, these weeks and months and years. A man who had learned to read and write because of her.

Bob Loring knew another kind of torture now. But he only swore at himself and said he deserved this punishment. He had been a damned, dreaming kid. He was a man now. It was time he woke up, forgot about Cathie Allison.

VI

THE next day Bob was laying up corral poles when two riders appeared. They were Cathie Allison and her friend from the East, dark, sleek-haired Jeff Tyler—a handsome youth who wore expensive riding clothes.

"Good morning, Bob Loring!" Cathie called blithely. "I'm ashamed for not knowing you yesterday. As soon as Dad told me who you were, I remembered all about you. . . . That hideous evening when you came charging up to the ranch in a buckboard that tipped over. . . ." She shuddered. Then she smiled, "I also remember persuading you to stay on at the L Bar when you were going to pull out one night."

"Yeah, I remember," he said flatly. "That's where I made a mistake."

"Mistake? Oh, Bob! Why do you say that?"

"That's a long story. I'd rather skip it."

"Mr. Loring, this is my friend, Jeff Tyler. . . ."

Bob nodded, didn't release the pole he was holding to shake hands.

"I—I brought you your check, your last month's wages," the girl went on, a bit nervously.

"How does one endorse checks when he neither reads nor writes?" asked Jeff Tyler, smiling. "Nothing personal now, Mr. Loring. It's only that, on the way up here, Cathie happened to mention that you—"

"It just can't be done," said Bob tonelessly. "That's why I can't use that check. You can take it back to your dad, Miss Allison, and tell him that I'm not on his payroll any more. I'm homesteadin' now."

"But Dad said that you were—" The girl stopped. Her dark eyes flashed disapprovingly. Then she smiled again and said, "Dad said to forget what happened yesterday, Bob. And I promised him I'd see that you did."

"Take his check back to him," he said. "Tell him to buy booze with it."

"Booze! Since when has Dad become a drunkard?"

"He drinks too much and he gambles too much. Maybe you can make him stop it. If you think that the L Bar's worth savin'. That's why I'm tellin' you this. It ain't just to hurt your feelin's."

"You, old Tim Loring's nephew, preaching about the evils of gambling! Well, I like that! The Allisons pick you up out of the gutter and this is the way you thank them. By double-crossing Dad on this homestead business and by trying to embarrass me in front of my friends! Which reminds me—" She tore a small chain from about her smooth throat, threw a mounted arrowhead at Bob's feet. "There! Keep that trinket!"

"Sure. And you keep your dad's check," Bob said evenly. His blue eyes met flashing hazel orbs unwaveringly.

"Blood tells, doesn't it?" she snapped furiously. "You take a stray cur in, feed him and he bites you! . . . Come on, Jeff. I've seen enough of this illiterate wolf! He can bare his fangs at somebody else after this!" She wheeled her horse, and Jeff Tyler followed.

Bob picked up the arrowhead, studied it for a long moment. It somehow resembled a miniature tomb in which the dreams of a hopeful heart had been buried. Suddenly a strong, brown hand clenched that arrowhead fiercely and fierce blue eyes looked off toward Morland. Bob wished he had gone to town with Deacon, had visited the saloons; had met and battled it out with Hugh Blainey and to hell with the consequences!

The next evening Deacon rode up to the half-finished cabin at Wheel Springs. He had two pints of whiskey with him. And Bob, still crushed by the weight of a little jasper arrowhead in his shirt pocket, drank freely with Deacon.

Grinning, Deacon said casually, "Well, I heard in town that Lawyer Copeland lost a case real early this morning."

"Yeah. Howcome?"

"Well, he and Blainey were celebrating their victory in Morland. Finally Blainey started for Bendville, and Copeland started riding back to Boomtown alone. It seems like Copeland was drowned trying to swim his horse across Sage River."

"What happened, Deacon? You know, damn you!"

"Well, my hunch is that Copeland met another rider swimming across from the opposite side of the river and there was some shooting in midstream. They found Copeland's horse. *He* got out all right. But Copeland, they think, went over White Rock Falls; and it isn't likely, they say, that he'll ever be found."

Slowly Bob digested that information. He could see that Deacon was wearing a new shirt, hat and overalls. But the boots, run over and pretty old, looked as if they'd been pretty wet recently.

"You think you got away clean?" Bob asked, worried.

"After being in Sage River that long? Hell, yes!"

"They'll think I—"

"Just possibly, yes. But you couldn't have been way over on Sage River, Bob. Forget it and have another drink."

Bob reached out, caught the little man's hand and gripped it hard.

The next morning, though—Deacon had gone up in the mountains for a few days to visit at Barth Donahue's prospecting camp—the sheriff called at Wheel Springs. The county attorney was with the sheriff. They arrested Bob, took him down to the L Bar ranch where they questioned him in regard to the sudden disappearance of Fred Copeland.

"I was at home," Bob said. That's all he would say.

"We'll have to take you back to Morland," said the county attorney.

"Give me another mock trial?" Bob asked. "Well, hop to it!"

"No!" said Cathie Allison quickly. "He was at home yesterday morning, gentlemen. I know. And so does Mr. Tyler here! We saw Mr. Loring at Wheel Springs, talked to him there!"

"You sure of that, Miss Allison?" asked the sheriff.

"I'd swear to it on a stack of Bibles!"

"Aw, he was at home all right," said the sheriff to the attorney. "I told you that Copeland was just too drunk to tackle swimmin' the Sage River."

After the officers had gone, Allison looked sternly at Bob and said, "Where's Deacon?"

"What do you care? He ain't workin' for you any more!" was Bob's flat reply.

"You might thank my daughter for furnishing you with an iron-clad alibi, Loring!"

"Maybe she figures it's to your interest not to have Copeland and Blainey grabbing Wheel Springs. I'm sure she ain't worried about whether or not they stick my neck in a noose."

"More of your illiterate impudence!" snapped Cathie. To her father, she said, "I'd suggest that you get one of the other punchers to homestead the Wheel Springs water."

"I will, too, if Bob here—"

"I'm keepin' that place," said the young man, blue eyes frosty again.

"You double-crossin' coyote!" Allison exploded. "So this is the thanks I get for takin' you in? Get out of my house, Loring. Stay out!"

The enraged cowman tried to kick Bob, and Jeff Tyler, husky and athletic, rushed to Allison's aid. A clever boxer, Tyler hit Bob three times in the face before the homesteader quite realized what was happening. Then he turned wolf as he had that day in the winter range cabin when he had battled and beaten Sam Brink.

He took six more of Tyler's light blows to land one of his own. And when he landed, Tyler staggered as if a horse had kicked him. Yet he kept trying to box and took another thudding blow to his ribs. Allison rushed in again, but Bob floored the cowman with a solid smash to the mouth. Then he turned on Tyler again, battered the dark man against the wall, smashed him to face and body until he was limp and until Cathie was screaming for him to stop.

Rusty Clark and Pete Parshall came running to the house. They looked inside, and Cathie shouted: "Grab this coyote!" She pointed at Bob. "Drag him outdoors and—"

"No," said Pete Parshall, looking at fallen, battered Jeff Tyler. "Rusty and me have been wantin' to see that dude with his moustache all twisted around like it is now. Howdy, Bob."

"Hello, fellows," Bob said. "Well, aren't you goin' to obey the orders of Miss Allison? She wants me beaten to a pulp."

"Better go home, Bob," said Rusty. "We'll be seein' you."

Bob went outdoors, mounted his horse and rode home, a bitter light in his level eyes. All his hopes, everything that he had worked for, seemed shattered and lost. He was tasting the acrid draft of wormwood.

VII

BOB didn't see Cathie again until he was proving up on his homestead. Deacon brought home the news that Mrs. Allison had passed away; that Dave Allison had gone East to bury his wife and bring his daughter home.

Bob said, "Ain't she married to that Tyler gent yet, Deacon?"

"Nope. I hear that Tyler lost interest after he heard that Dave Allison was not as well off as he once was. Too, maybe Tyler didn't like the treatment he got in Wyoming. Why are you keeping away from Bendville, fellow? You're not under peace bond any more. And Hugh Blainey's still hanging around that town. You act like a damned hermit lately. What's wrong? You miss the Allison friendship?"

"I've just lost interest in things, Deacon. I think I'll jar loose here sometime soon. Go out and raise hell. Live a little—till I die."

"Now you're talking!" Deacon applauded. "I saw you monkeying with my deck of cards the other night. You haven't forgotten the tricks your slick old uncle taught you. We could live a high life, you and me, if—"

"We'll see," Bob answered. "I'm goin' to get my few head of stock rounded up, put 'em in the pasture here."

"Sell out?" Deacon prompted.

"We'll see."

One evening, a week later, Bob Loring rode the moonlit trail to Bendville. He wanted to see old Carl Monson, a livestock dealer, about buying his horses and cattle. But the first person he saw when he reached the little town was Cathie Allison. She was standing alone on the porch of the store.

"Hello, Cathie," Bob said. "I—I heard about your mother. I'm sorry she—she couldn't have got well and come home."

"Yes, I'm sure *you* must be very sorry, Mr. Loring. You're so worried about the welfare of the Allison family." Her voice was unsteady. She looked pitifully alone standing there.

"Why don't you go home?" Bob asked.

"I will if Dad ever leaves that saloon over there. I've waited two hours for him now. I wish you'd go and tell him, if it isn't asking too much, that we should be starting home."

"I will." Bob rode across the street, tied his horse at the saloon rack and went inside.

There was quite a crowd of spectators around the poker table. One of that group was Deacon Chadwick who had been in town for a little spree. Seated at the table were Carl Monson, the livestock dealer and a slim man, well dressed, who was a stranger to Bob. One chair was occupied by Hugh Blainey who glanced up quickly, then away from Bob. The fourth player was Dave Allison, recklessly drunk.

"What's up, Deacon?" Bob whispered.

"Allison's blowing off steam after the ordeal he's been through. And he's going to lose his shirt."

"He's just borrowed two thousand dollars from Carl Monson. They'll clean him—Blainey and that slick stranger—sure as hell."

For a long moment Bob watched intently. Then he moved to the table and said, "Mind if I buy a stack of chips, anybody?"

"This ain't penny ante, Loring," said Carl Monson nervously. "You couldn't sit in this game."

"No!" growled Blainey. "Get to hell out!"

But Bob bought chips; borrowed from Monson on the livestock which the dealer knew he owned. Deacon Chadwick tensed, crowded his way closer to the table.

Allison ignored Bob. So did the stranger, a flinty-eyed man who seemed too friendly with Hugh Blainey. Allison plunged recklessly, whether or not he had good cards. And Blainey al-

ways raised. But Bob began raising Blainey. Two big pots he took away from the gambler.

When Bob first dealt, Deacon couldn't keep his eyes off those big skilful hands manipulating cards. Neither could Blainey, who blinked in wonderment at the swift, sure movement of those hands. Blainey shifted uneasily in his chair and said, "You handle cards too damned much like your slick old uncle to suit me, Loring!"

"You mean the uncle you shot?" Bob's blue eyes were like bright steel daggers menacing Blainey. "Well, he taught me to handle cards. Just like Deacon Chadwick taught me to use a gun. How many cards'll you have, Blainey?"

"Two!"

"Bluffin' again, eh?" Bob smiled. "You, stranger—you pal of Blainey's —how many'll you have?"

"Three. And I'm no friend of anybody's here. I'm a stranger in town. My name's Chris Applegate."

The game grew steeper. Blainey was trying to freeze Bob out, but he couldn't do it. The size of Bob's chip pile grew. Dave Allison was losing heavily. It was Bob who said, "Why don't we play for some real stakes? Take a chance, Allison. Bet your outfit, or your equity in it, and let's have a real pot."

"Sure!" growled Blainey. "It's my deal!"

They goaded Allison into betting, made him sign IOU'S. But when Blainey dealt, he was too anxious to get the cards he wanted. Bob Loring said something about Joel Gurdette—and Blainey muffed the trick he was trying to pull. It was so crude that even Dave Allison noticed it. Allison called Blainey a name. Carl Monson called him a name, too. But it was Bob Loring who really spoke words that no man could take.

Hugh Blainey's red face purpled. Suddenly he kicked back his chair and went for his gun. But Bob's gun was already arcing upward. Hot flame spurted across the table. A bullet raked the hide off one of Bob's ribs. His own bullet caught Blainey's gun, knocked it out of his hand.

"Get the hell out of here and stay out," Bob commanded Blainey, and Blainey slunk out the door.

"Good shootin', you double-crossin' coyote!" growled Dave Allison at Bob. "But let's don't break up the game. What the hell was you about to reach for your gun for, Applegate?"

"He wanted to save Blainey," said Deacon Chadwick. "That is, till he saw my gun was out, too."

"Play cards!" Bob Loring growled. "I've got some Cradle Valley range. I want some more."

"Your luck can't last!" Allison rumbled thickly.

A few minutes later every man's chips were in on the bet. Allison was risking all he had. But Monson had dropped out. Applegate's stony eyes were on the stakes—that is, until Bob started to deal.

Never had cards been shuffled so quickly, cards that were at times deftly concealed by big brown hands. Men stopped breathing. But it was Bob Loring's hand—three kings and a pair of sixes—that won the stakes.

"You're a damned cheat, Loring!" yelled Chris Applegate.

"Am I?" Bob's eyes were blue agates. "What did I do?"

"I don't know! It was too damned fast to see, but you cheated!"

"How?" said Deacon. And other spectators chorused also, "How? How?"

"Get out of this saloon, Applegate," Bob said. "Get out of town. And take that crooked pal Blainey with you. You've got two minutes!"

If Applegate wanted to fight it out with guns, he didn't. He started for the door, was nearly knocked off his feet by Cathie Allison who had come tearing into the saloon.

"Dad!" she moaned. "I got tired of waiting. Started to walk home. Then

I heard shots. I ran back to town—" She caught her breath.

"We—we're not goin' home, Cathie," said her father stupidly. "Mr. Loring's just won whatever I had left in the L Bar. He's as slick with cards as his uncle ever dared to be. Well, maybe I can borrow enough to put you on the train, send you back East to your mother's folks. . . ."

"Dad!" The girl flung her arms about him. "I'll never leave you again! Let card-shark Loring have what's left of the L Bar. Surely he'll allow us to keep a team. We'll go home, pack your things." She whirled to face Bob, and her eyes were like twin volcanoes. "Then the vultures can take what's left!"

Bob got up, walked outdoors. His pockets were stuffed with currency, with IOU'S. But there was no elation of victory as he went his way.

He stopped, looked at Cathie and her father who were walking toward the buckboard in front of the store. The girl was steadying her father, was soon helping him in the buckboard that started out across the open, moonlit hills.

Bob went over to Lawyer Everett's house, got Everett out of bed.

"What the hell do you want at this time of night, Loring?"

"Your services. I'll pay you well for them. Go saddle that old black horse of yours, Everett. We're headin' for the L Bar. Now!"

"All right."

"What's up, Bob?" asked the voice of Deacon Chadwick softly.

"We'll soon be travelin', Deacon. Wait in town till I get back. Here's a ten-dollar bill. Go and amuse yourself."

"Thanks, pard! Boy, you sure handled those cards—"

"Forget it!"

Deacon disappeared. Pretty soon grumbling old Orin Everett and Bob were riding across the hills, overtaking a buckboard that left in its wake a billowing, silver scarf of dust.

"What do you want?" bellowed Dave Allison, halting his team.

"Bob Loring wants to give some IOU'S back to you," said Everett. "He's also deeding the Wheel Springs place over to you."

"Whuh—why?" blurted Cathie.

"He says he owes the Allisons a lot," was Everett's reply. "That's all I know. We'll talk things over when we reach the L Bar. Can I ride with you, Allison? I'm too darned old to relish this horseback riding."

"Get in," said Dave Allison stupidly. "We can ride three in a seat."

"I'll ride Mr. Everett's horse," said Cathie, and she hopped from the rig to take the old black's reins.

For a mile she rode beside Bob in silence. Then she said, "Why are you doing this, Bob? What's suddenly melted you to pity?"

"It ain't pity," he answered flatly. "I just want to get away from Cradle Valley. Your dad deserves Wheel Springs, but I'm makin' you promise you won't let him mortgage that place. Then, if you do lose the old ranch, you'll still have something—"

"Don't you think we can save the L Bar, Bob?"

"With hard work—yes. But that's your problem now."

"Isn't there any chance in the world that it could be *our* problem, Bob? Oh, I don't want you to leave Cradle Valley. Neither does Dad. When we started home, he said he was glad that, if he had to make a fool of himself, you had won what he had worked for and lost."

"He seemed to think I'd cheated to win what he lost."

"Tell me why you're giving those winnings back."

"Maybe I did cheat to win 'em. Well, when you're playin' with cheaters, like Blainey and Applegate. . . ." His voice trailed off. He was looking toward Cradle Valley, a range wrapped in the silver beauty of moonlight. A lump rose to his throat, wedged there.

"That arrowhead I threw at you,"

said Cathie. "Won't you let me have that, too?"

"Why?"

"I want it. I'll keep it forever. And every time I touch it, I'll say a prayer for you, Bob Loring. I'll wonder where you are. Please give it to me." Suddenly she swung from her saddle and said, "Put it around my neck, Bob!"

He hesitated, finally got off his horse. But the hands that had been so steady in card manipulation tonight trembled a little now. They were touching Cathie's cheeks, smooth and soft and tear-stained. Then the girl's arms suddenly lifted, swiftly encircled Bob's neck.

Lips, tender and warm, were suddenly against Bob's lips. Then Cathie was smothered in his arms. In reality he was holding this girl as he had held her a thousand times in his dreams. She was smiling and crying and whispering, "You've *got* to stay here, Bob! Always!"

"Always," he echoed huskily.

"I was afraid of that," said a gentle voice.

Both Bob and Cathie whirled to see Deacon sitting there on his horse. Deacon added, "I suspected something was up when I saw you riding out of town with Lawyer Everett, Bob. I started getting suspicious when you goaded Dave into risking his equity in the L Bar. Well, I can see that you and I aren't making a tour of all the saloons in Wyoming."

"That's right." Bob smiled. "You're stayin' here, too, you old son of a gun. Look at you, grinnin' drunk again. Go on home."

"To Wheel Springs or the L Bar?"

"The L Bar!" Cathie cried.

"I guess I will," said Deacon. "Blessings on you, my children. I'll go up and break the news to your dad, Cathie. Take your time getting home, kids. You'll never see a moon this bright again . . . long may it shine!" Deacon rode on.

Cathie was in Bob's arms again. A lazy, sage-scented breeze drifted across the hills. And perhaps in it was the voice of old Tim Loring whispering: "You're playin' lucky cards tonight, Bob. You drew the one heart you needed. . . ."

In the Third October Issue

The Resurrection of Obadiah

A novelette of a gallant girl's bitter battle

By CHANDLER WHIPPLE

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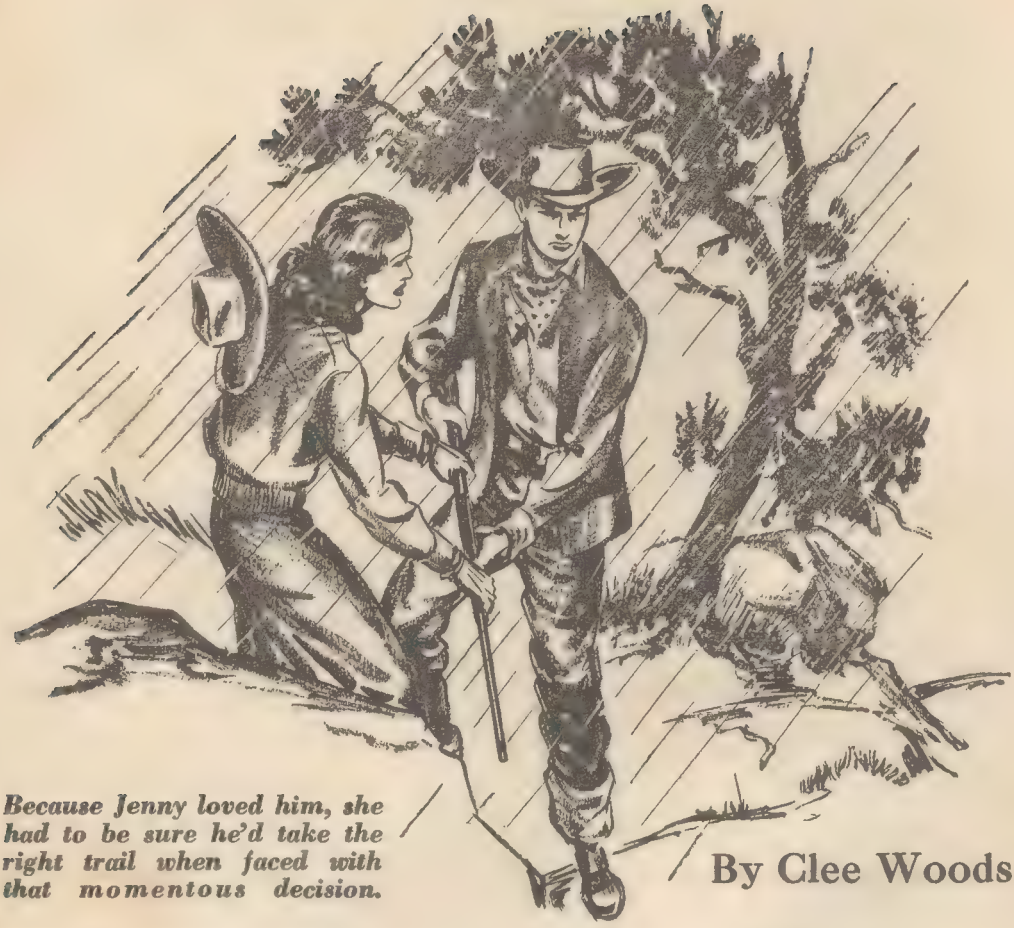
On Double Arrow Range

A short story of a range romance

By MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY



Because Jenny loved him, she had to be sure he'd take the right trail when faced with that momentous decision.

By Clee Woods

One Trail for Two

LIGHTNING ripped through a dark New Mexico sky and lapped its blinding tongue down into a clump of pine trees on a ridge point. The dozen horses jumped in fear and ran to the far side of the corral. Jenny Mason followed them, loop built for a throw.

She was going to saddle fresh horses for her father and brother, and have the mounts ready when they got in. They were making a flying trip out to the ranch because of some misinformation, Jenny thought. Billy, her brother, had telephoned hastily that they were on their way and then hung up before she could make him understand that she and her mother were not afraid to stay alone at night. The two men must get back into town tonight. This oncoming rain would turn the road, poor at best, into a slippery quagmire, and the Ford pickup wouldn't be able to make the return trip—to say nothing of getting across flooded creeks. From the looks of the approaching storm, the river would be rising dangerously within two or three hours.

Her father and Billy had to appear in court by nine in the morning because

they were the State's two main witnesses against Howard Garrison. Garrison would go to the penitentiary 'most certainly by their testimony, with a good chance to hang. Jenny wondered why her menfolks were so disturbed about things at home. She hadn't reported the least uneasiness to them, and she didn't think her mother had.

Jenny advanced toward the milling horses. The wind fanned their manes and tails and tossed her dark hair that hung below her cream-colored Stetson at the back of her head. Specks of rain struck the side of her slim oval face. She was such a mite of a girl; nevertheless, her small right hand made a dexterous throw and the loop fell about the head of a sixteen-hand dun.

The horse stopped and blew rebelliously through its nostrils. Jenny moved toward him, taking the taut rope in, hand over hand. She assured the dun with a pat on the neck when she reached him, and then tied him to a juniper picket of the corral fence while she went for a saddle.

Just as she cleared the corner of the shed, a man's figure hurtled toward her, and his arms were enfolding her before she could spring away. A cry of fear broke from her, then an exclamation of amazement. Of all people, Lon Whiting! She'd gone to school with Lon, but she hadn't seen much of him the past four years, since he went into partnership with his cousin, Howard Garrison, on the big Hoe K outfit. Her dad simply could never endure Garrison, and consequently he had frowned his partner Lon away when Lon started riding by on first one excuse and then another to see Jenny.

Tall, flat-backed Lon, with the long rugged face and smiling blue eyes. All cowboy. Honest, loyal—too much so for his own good, perhaps. His arms now had her in a grip that Jenny had never suspected any man might have. He lifted her bodily and ran for the strip of scrub oak by a dry wash back of the corral.

Jenny was helpless in his grasp. But it was strange that she couldn't be very much afraid, after she knew who it was. She refused to make another outcry, even though he made no attempt to cover her mouth. But her mother had heard her first involuntary cry. Mrs. Mason was running from the house, waving her hands frantically and screaming. Lon kept on for the oaks. Jenny thought that he wanted her mother to see her carried off, crazy though the idea seemed for the moment.

A little way up the wash, where the banks were above a horse's back, they came to a big dapple gray. Lon held her with one hand while he swung up. Then he tried to lift her up on the saddle before him. Jenny surprised him with a sudden flounce, and nearly tore loose from his grip. She fell to the ground and tried to tear free from that hand that held her.

Somehow she still wasn't afraid of Lon Whiting, but by now she had begun to associate this episode with her father's hurried trip from town and the trial tomorrow. Aside from that, she wasn't willing to be snatched up and packed off in any such high-handed manner, no matter if the kidnaper were Lon.

As she kicked and lunged, the dapple gray shied sideways and thus added to Lon's difficulty in holding onto her. But she did not break that powerful grip on her wrist. He gave her a sudden yank and fetched her halfway to her feet. Then he bent downward, thrust both hands beneath her arms and brought her up onto the horse. The dapple gray broke into a trot. Lon let him have his head a moment and began subduing Jenny's flailing legs and writhing body.

"You know I don't mean you any harm," he said, crushing her tightly to him. "Just got to use you as bait."

"For what?" Jenny demanded.

She submitted to the crush of his arms and allowed him to settle her more comfortably in front of him. She hoped by this to lure him off guard a moment,

and so pave the way for a sudden break.

"To keep your dad and Billy on this side of the river until it's too high for them to get back over. They got a fake telephone call that's sure to fetch them high-tailing it here, and they'll chase us now until the river cuts them off from town. There's not a bridge this side of the gorge that they can cross on, and it's too rough a river to be forded during a flood. To get back to town while the river is up, they'd have to ride horseback clean over through Monroe's Pass and then come around by Garcia Canyon—ninety miles of tough riding. They'd never make it by noon tomorrow."

"Lon," said Jenny, "I never dreamed you'd be party to a thing like this."

He looked disturbed at her condemnation.

"Who wouldn't do it?" he defended. "If your dad and Billy testify against Howard in the morning, he's a goner. But if they fail to show up, our lawyers will persuade Judge Zachary to refuse the district attorney another postponement. Without your family's testimony, the jury will have to bring in a verdict of not guilty."

ENNY saw it all now. The district attorney had got the case laid over once because her father had been in bed with pneumonia. This very afternoon the prosecutor had been granted a recess until nine in the morning, to allow his two star witnesses time to hurry out to their ranch and back. But Judge Zachary was secretly in favor of Garrison, as some well knew when he let Garrison out on only ten thousand dollars bond, pending trial. In the morning, he would order the trial to proceed without the two witnesses who, the defense might claim, had left town on a trivial excuse. Garrison would be acquitted before the truth of the happenings out here could be made known.

"I've got to stick by my partner," Lon declared warmly.

"But he murdered that Three X foreman," Jenny cried. "Dad and Billy saw him run from the rimrock after the death shot."

"There's some terrible mistake," Lon held out. "Howard swore to me on a Holy Bible that he never had anything to do with it. I believe him."

"Of course he would," Jenny declared. "He knows he couldn't get your help if you thought he was guilty. Don't be a dupe, Lon. You know my father wouldn't lie. Neither would Billy."

"But they could be mistaken about Howard's identity."

"No, they were too near. There is no doubt."

"But Howard has witnesses," Lon insisted, "that he wasn't within ten miles of the place where that cowboy was killed, when it happened."

"Witnesses, yes," Jenny scoffed, "who can be bought for a hundred dollars apiece, to swear anything."

Jenny was looking up into his face now, and he had only one arm about her. He was guiding the horse with the other hand, up through a rough little canyon. The rain suddenly beat down upon them, but Jenny didn't seem to notice it. She was fighting to set Lon on the trail she knew to be right—one trail for the two of them together.

"Lon, listen to me," she begged. "If you get a guilty man like that set free, you'll be party to his crime. It will mean, too, that you've taken the start on the down trail. With Garrison as your partner, you'll never turn around. You'll keep going on and on from one questionable trick to another still more sorry, until at last you won't bother to ask the right or wrong of anything—so long as it'll help you get more rangeland and more power in this valley."

He made no answer. She saw that she had penetrated a weak spot in his loyalty to a partner and cousin.

The rain was pouring down now. At this rate it wouldn't take long for it to bring the river up so not even horses could ford it.

"Let's go back, Lon, and take what comes," she implored. "Billy is a hot-headed kid. He'll kill you later if you keep me out in the mountains like this."

"I'm not afraid of—"

"Of course you aren't afraid of Billy or Dad either," she interrupted. "But that wouldn't prevent bad trouble when they found out what you'd done."

There in his arms now, looking up into his distressed face, Jenny realized all at once that she loved this big cowboy more deeply than she ever had admitted to herself. He was so strong, clean, fine. And so loyal that he was bending over backwards to stick by a cousin who didn't deserve any man's support. She felt his arm slacken its grip on her slightly. Only let him relax that grip a little more.

Suddenly he gave up the argument entirely and squeezed her tighter to him.

"Jenny, I love you!" he murmured.

Jenny's head swam dizzily. With his grip telling her that he meant it even more fervently than he could say, she knew that she was going to love him now and forever, no matter what he had done or would do. She wanted to throw both arms around his neck and forget everything in the world but him and her love for him. But from far back in her some place there came a warning cry. She had to turn Lon about and keep him from that hard man's trail that wound this way and that and always kept going down and down.

"You do love me!" he cried.

His lips were bending toward hers. His grip grew still tighter. Chaos broke loose in Jenny's heart. If she surrendered now, when he was still determined to stand by a sullen, distrusting cousin, he might never face about with her.

"No, Lon," she managed to say, a frightened catch in her voice, "I don't think I'd ever love a killer's puppet!"

She tried to laugh up into his face. She wanted to shock him into seeing himself as the world must sooner or later see him. But her laugh sounded hysterical. Her words seemed unnatural as soon as they left her lips.

He suddenly pushed her back at arm's length and demanded angrily, "So you think I'm in on it too, do you?"

Jenny's chance came instantly, when in his anger his fingers relaxed their grip on her arms. She threw all her strength into one hard flounce and tore herself from his hands. He leaped off as she was falling to the ground, but she eluded his dive for her, and bounded away. He sprang back onto his horse and raced after her.

Jenny knew he would overtake her quickly, even before she could make it to the deep wash and plunge over its bank. But the mesa wall directly at her left was nearer. She wheeled and made for the boulders that had fallen off the cliff and littered the flat ground at its foot.

She reached the boulders barely ahead of him, and the rocks blocked his horse. He was compelled to dismount again. Jenny took to the mesa wall itself, climbing nimbly. He pressed hard after her, twice nearly within grasping distance of her boots. Then she jumped upward, caught one foot on a narrow step-like ledge and made a frantic grab for a thorny cat's-claw bush that grew on another ledge just above. The bush seemed very insecure in the wet earth that was only a few inches deep on the ledge. But its precarious support enabled her to pull on up to a much wider ledge. From there she could make it to the top.

Lon also seized the cat's-claw, just as unflinchingly as she had in spite of its many small thorns. But he weighed eighty pounds more than her even hundred, and his hasty heave at the bush tore it loose. Jenny cried out when he tumbled backward onto the sharp boulders below. But he managed to land with no greater hurt than an injured ankle. With that handicap, however, and the bush handhold gone, he could not get at her again without going a little farther around. By that time, she could lose herself from him on

the mesa and circle back to meet her father and Billy.

"Well, you win!" he admitted. "But I want you to remember always, Jenny—never forget what I was saying just before I forgot to be wary."

Blessed words! She'd never forget them if she lived a hundred more years.

"I won't forget, Lon," she vowed. "Now that I'm free, though, I don't want to be. I robbed you of your decision for or against a killer. Your whole life hangs on your stand this afternoon—on this decision. I'm giving that decision back to you. Here, I'm your prisoner again."

DELIBERATELY she sat down on the ledge, slid over and dropped down beside him. He stared at her a moment in stark unbelief. She had outwitted him and escaped. But she had flung aside her freedom and risked everything she had at stake in this strange struggle, just to make him a better man. Could she be right? Was it possible that Howard had deceived him completely?

"Who are you," Jenny delivered one final blow, "to set yourself up between the courts and an accused man? Are you going to let your selfish interest and your prejudice make you believe witnesses such as Howard Garrison has, and throw aside the word of Billy and my father?"

"Jenny, I'm ashamed," he confessed at last. "I've been blind, because I was afraid for the good name of the Hoe K Ranch. But I'm ready to let Howard go into court on all the evidence, not just on the testimony of his picked witnesses. Get on home and hurry your dad back to town. I'll just clear out of the country until they cool down against me. You take my horse."

He made off up the canyon. Jenny didn't try to stop him. Billy was going to be hard to control when he caught up with her, and her father none too mild. If Lon were present when they showed up, they might start shooting before she could explain. Or, at the least, they would so abuse Lon that they might turn him from his present good intentions.

It was well that she let him go at once. He was scarcely out of sight when two riders came lickety-larrup up the bottom. Billy was out in the lead, typical of his hot-headedness.

"Jenny, are you all right?" he cried, when he saw her.

"Oh, sure, Billy," she declared. "It was Lon and he—"

"I know who it was, all right," Billy cut her off. "The ornery devil is no better than Garrison and I'm shootin' him down on sight!"

"No, no, Billy!" Jenny protested vehemently.

Billy was going to ride on past her. Jenny had to run out and seize his reins to stop him. Her father was almost as angry when he came steaming up in the rain. Jenny held them long enough to argue and then plead.

"I convinced Lon how wrong he was," she told them, "and he agreed to let Garrison go to trial without his help. Don't waste time running after Lon. You'll need every minute to get back across the river and make sure of being at the court-house on time in the morning."

"Billy, there's something to that," said the elder Mason.

Mason helped Jenny sooth Billy's youthful wrath. Good old Dad! He must see how it was with her. At last they had Billy temporarily pacified, and they turned back.

Then, as if the start back for the river were the signal, a rifle cracked from the mesa rim above them. Mason was knocked from his saddle, and the horrified Jenny saw that the bullet had passed through his body.

"Jenny," Billy cried, "he's killed Dad—that Lon Whiting! Get to cover, quick, and—"

A second shot cut off Billy's words. He rolled from his horse and dived for the nearest cover. Despite the shooting,

Jenny fell off her mount and ran to her father. Old John Mason lay with white face in the mud. He rallied as Jenny turned him over, and her bitter little whimper stirred him to talk.

"You can't love him now," Mason managed to force out. "Get him, Billy! Get him!"

Billy already was dashing for the foot of the mesa, firing upward with his Colt as he ran. Her father had caught a last breath and sank down, dead. Jenny wiped away blinding tears and then she tore his Winchester from its saddle boot and raced after Billy. Her brother had got up under the cliff wall so that the hidden rifleman no longer could see him, and he was taking the nearest route to the top of the mesa wall. Jenny stopped and looked for the killer, not considering the fact that she was exposed to his fire. But not even a wisp of smoke betrayed his whereabouts. Jenny took after Billy.

He beat her to the top, of course, and then from the far side she heard his rifle begin to talk. Quick, angry shots, too rapid to be accurate.

When Jenny got out to where she could see down into the next narrow little valley, she barely caught sight of Lon bounding around a cliff shoulder some five hundred yards away. He limped plainly on his injured ankle, but apparently Billy had not touched him with a single bullet. Billy had suffered only a slight wound in the thigh.

"I'll get him yet," Billy swore. "He has to cross that little open spot beyond the two junipers."

Jenny followed Billy's example and dropped down to rest rifle on knees. She aimed it on the open spot and waited for the limping figure. There he came! On the dead run, unmindful of his bad ankle. Billy's rifle cracked again. Jenny's finger closed on the trigger. But she couldn't pull the trigger hard enough. Just couldn't, with the gun lined on Lon. But she had to! Lon had shot her father. She pulled again and the rifle went off. But she flinched so much that she knew the bullet never went near Lon. Now he was out of sight again.

"Come on, let's get him!" Billy urged, bounding away.

Jenny followed. They stayed hot after Lon for two or three miles. Three times they caught sight of him, but he was showing more endurance than they and pulling away from them steadily despite the ankle.

"But he's circlin' back toward the river," Billy pointed out, "and maybe we'll get him cornered."

Maybe. Jenny began to pray that they would not. One man whom she loved lay dead on the wet earth back there, and she didn't want another that way. Early nightfall wasn't far away, and the rain poured so hard that they found it difficult to get across several small washes. Sometimes it rained so hard they had trouble finding the imprints of Lon's boots in the mud, although he was only minutes ahead of them.

"He's makin' for the old Burrito ford —the only place a man or a horse might swim the river," Billy guessed. "Let's gamble on that, sis, and hit straight for it."

JENNY trailed her brother without protest. And Billy had made the right guess. When they topped out on the low rocky bluff overlooking the little river, Jenny saw Billy throw his Winchester to his shoulder. Its first bullet splashed a little muddy water some two-thirds of the way across the river. And just behind that splash was Lon's black head! Lon was trying to swim the turbulent river.

At this point the already swollen stream spread out a little and the water was less violent just before it began leaping and frothing in the narrow gorge. It was taking Lon downward at a rapid rate. He might not make the bank before he was sucked into the gorge. He was very tired, she could see,

from his long run and the battle against the river.

Billy fired again, handicapped by both wind and rain. The ball couldn't have missed Lon's ear by half an inch, judging by its splash just beyond his face. That seemed to be the first he knew of Billy's attack. His face turned backward a second, and he tried to shout something. Jenny couldn't hear because of the roar of the water, but it seemed to her that Lon was begging for his life.

Suddenly something gave way in Jenny. She couldn't see Lon killed like that, no matter what he had done. Memory of what he had told her back there on the horse was too fresh in her heart. She leaped at Billy and knocked him sideways as he fired. Then she threw arms about the youthful brother and clung to him.

"Billy, don't shoot. Don't kill him!" she cried. "Let him live."

Billy tried to shake her off and at the same time was calling Lon vicious names. Jenny hung on frantically. Billy dropped his rifle in his anger and half tore her hold loose. Jenny lunged back for a more desperate grip. She got it and tripped Billy to the top of the hard rock. Then she hung on and looked for Lon's black head again.

There Lon went, much nearer the bank. Nearer, also, to the swift water. The stronger current had him already, sweeping him dangerously near the frothing rapids.

Then Jenny saw something else. The willows parted on the far bank just ahead of Lon and she saw a man's face and shoulders appear, then a six-shooter. And its muzzle pointed downward at Lon! It was Howard Garrison. Jenny screamed aloud, mingling her cry to Lon with a frantic appeal to Billy to look. As she screamed she heard a six-shooter's dull, angry boom. Her heart went cold.

"Garrison killed Dad and Lon's after him!" she finally cried at Billy.

In that one tragic instant she had seen through the whole thing. Garrison, out on bail through a too lenient judge, had come out to watch Lon and make sure that the two dangerous witnesses didn't get back to town in time to testify. When Lon allowed her to turn back and take the two witnesses with her, the surly Garrison had not hesitated to kill.

Almost equal to the cold-bloodedness of the shooting was his apparent intention to let the killing of Mr. Mason be charged to Lon. That could be done so easily because Lon had not attempted to cover up his fake abduction of Jenny —in fact, had invited discovery purposely. That was how Howard Garrison appreciated Lon's mistaken loyalty.

As all that terrible analysis flashed through Jenny's mind, she realized that Lon's black head was missing over on the surface of the muddy water. A pain jabbed through her heart, so intense she cried aloud.

Then rage shook her into action. She seized her fallen Winchester and swung it onto the willows across the river. But Garrison had vanished from the spot. Nevertheless, she poured bullets into the brush after him. Billy joined her in the bombardment. Then abruptly she stopped.

Lon again! He had bobbed up some twenty-five yards below where she last saw him.

He had no more than struck the bank with bootless feet when his six-shooter swung up and jabbed toward the willows. Jenny could not see Garrison now, but she knew he was in the willows, and that he had tried to get the drop on Lon. Both Lon's gun and Garrison's were raging. It meant death to one of the two partners of the Hoe K. Jenny whipped up her Winchester and fired into the willows.

But Billy stopped her. "Lon's got him," he proclaimed. "Listen!"

Garrison was fairly screeching a plea for mercy. Jenny knew that he was wounded. She saw Lon advance into the willows, Colt ready in his hand.

"Be careful, Lon," she called.

In a moment Lon was back in view. He cupped his hands and megaphoned

over to them, "I've got to get Howard to a doctor! He'll live to stand trial for shooting Mr. Mason—if they don't hang him at the present trial."

He turned toward the willows. Then suddenly he swung back.

"Jenny," he shouted, "I want to know now, will you ever give a goose like me another chance?"

The tears streamed down Jenny's rain-streaked face. Tears of both poignant grief and overwhelming joy, all in one release of pent-up floodgates. If she could only throw her arms about his neck now and hold him tight to her forever. She would do just that the instant the raging river let her get to him.

"All the chance in the world, Lon," she cried.

When Cowboy Aided Stork

THE most harrowing experience in the entire colorful career of Dad Streeter, former cowboy stage driver, mule-skinner and buffalo hunter, now of Ogden, Utah, occurred in the 1880's in western Nebraska when he was fifteen years old. Dad, who once worked on a ranch with the outlaw Butch Cassidy, rode broncs in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, and had many other exciting adventures, says nothing can compare with the time he aided the stork.

"I'd lost my way while riding in the sand knolls of western Nebraska," says Dad, "and after riding for several hours and getting nowhere, I saw a settler's sod cabin.

"When I knocked and a woman's voice said, 'Come in,' I asked if she could point the way to Clark's ranch on Frenchman Fork of the Republican River. She said, 'Yes, but it's a long way from here and it looks like a storm. You'd better stay here.'

"I replied, 'No, you point the way and I'll be off.'

"Then she said: 'Oh, please stay, please do, I'm sick, all alone, nobody within miles. My husband has gone for a doctor and won't be back until tomorrow.'

"I couldn't refuse any more, so I attended to my horse and came in. The woman said, 'I'm not able to get out of bed. You make yourself at home. You'll find something to eat in the cupboard; make yourself some coffee and when you get sleepy you can occupy that bed in the kitchen.'

"I went to bed early and it seemed I hadn't been asleep long when I was awakened by sobs and groans. When they turned to screams I could stand it no longer. I went to the woman's door and asked if there was anything I could do to relieve her. She said hot cloths might help. I kept her supplied with them for some time, but they didn't seem to do much good.

"She was getting worse all the time, and in calmer moments always moaning, 'Why don't they come?'

"She finally got so bad that I had to hold her to keep her in bed. After a while she relaxed, stopped struggling and lay quiet. Then I thought the poor creature was dead, and no one can realize how scared I was, for up until that time I'd never met death face to face.

"I stood there in a daze wondering what to do next when I heard a snuffling and snorting which finally wound up in an 'a-ah.' Then I realized that a little soul had come to earth and that the mother had not died as I had supposed.

"Now it was my turn to fret and stew and wish 'they' would come! The way that kid was tuning up you'd think that he had an oversized pair of lungs. I finally became aware that there was work to be done, so I rolled up my sleeves and went at it. Well sir, I took that little fellow over to the stove, got a pan of warm water, and gave him his first bath. He evidently didn't like it very well, for the more I washed the louder he yelled, just like he knew I was a stranger.

"Then I looked around for clothes, but couldn't find any. Perhaps it was just as well anyway, for I doubt if I'd have known how to put them on. I found a towel which I wrapped around his body, tying the two upper corners around his neck and under his chin. I laid him in his mother's arms, after fixing up the bed as best I could.

"They both went to sleep and slept so long that I went to see if they were all right. When I bent over the bed the mother didn't say a word, but gave me one of the sweetest smiles I've ever seen, which said plainer than words how she appreciated what I'd done. I prepared some tea and toast which she seemed to relish, even asking for a second cup of tea.

"Finally, after a long wait, I saw a cloud of dust a long way off, which finally became a rig with two men in it and the horses on the run. It was the doctor and the husband, and when they burst into the room they stopped short upon seeing me.

"The man of the house said, 'Who are you?'

"I replied, 'I'm a stranger who got lost and came here to ask a night's lodgings.'

"The mother then called, showing him the baby, and giving a short explanation of what had happened. The man turned to me and said, 'You weren't lost, but sent here by a kind providence in answer to my prayers.'"

—GLEN PERRINS

OLD-TIMERS DANCE TONIGHT

The Gyp Bonanza

By George Armin Schaftel

When a fellow's honest, there're things he can't do . . . as Johnny found out for himself.

JOHNNY CAGLE reached the ghost camp of Argus by thumbing a ride on an ore truck. Argus wasn't a ghost town any more, however. Prospectors again were rushing into the Death Valley district. The new price of gold and the war in Europe had created a demand for minerals, and Johnny found Argus booming. Buildings that had been the abode of owls and bats and kangaroo rats for two generations now were remodeled and open for business. The main street was thronged with booted men.

Johnny Cagle had not come to find a mine. Johnny Cagle had come because of a much-read letter in his pocket. Johnny Cagle had come to put a headstone on a lonely grave. . . .

He turned into the doorway of the first old building with "Oro Peso Hotel" painted on the window.

A girl stood at the desk. A pretty girl, Johnny noticed.

"I want a room, miss," he said.

She smiled at him. She said, "Johnny Cagle, I've been wondering when you'd show up."

Johnny stared at her, mystified that she should know him. She was tall for a girl, and shapely of figure. Her hair was a lustrous bronzy gold, and her blue eyes were cool and serene and confident. She smiled at the puzzled surprise in his dark eyes.

"Johnny, Mal Cagle showed me a picture of you in the front of his watch."

"Oh! Then you knew Dad."

She nodded and turned away, and opened a small iron safe against the wall. She took something from the safe and set it on the desk in front of Johnny—a cardboard box. She opened it and walked behind the tall stand of mail boxes, leaving him alone with the

box on the desk. His lean young face tensed as he steeled himself against the hot flow of emotion that welled in him. Here in the cardboard container was a massive signet ring of roman gold, with initials M.C. in Comstock silver upon a base of ebony. Here was a cameo brooch carved with the profile of a lovely young woman—Johnny's mother who had died when he was just old enough to keep vivid memories of her. Here was a woman's watch fitted with a pin like a fleur-de-lys to fasten onto a shirtwaist. Johnny's heritage they were, out of all there once had been.

"You're Mary Stewart. Dad used to write about you," he said, when the girl came back. She nodded. Johnny asked, "Do you—know where he's buried?"

She nodded. "On that claim he bought, in Uintah Gorge. I put a monument on it, Johnny. We owed him that, Mother and I." She looked at Johnny's dusty, work-roughened clothes. He was down to his last ten dollars and looked it. "You'll stay here with us, Johnny? We'll have dinner at six."

He nodded. Later, when she wasn't busy, he had a lot of questions to ask her.

RESTLESSLY he wandered down the one street of Argus and walked into Hole Card Saloon. A poker game was going on at the rear of the Hole Card.

Idly Johnny paused to watch. He made a startling discovery. It looked like a mild sort of poker game, but Johnny realized, presently, that three of the players were in cahoots to trim the fourth man.

"I got three eights," one man said.

"No good," said another man. "The old fellow doesn't bet on less than three face cards or better. Let's throw in the cards till we get better hands."

The fourth player seemingly had heard none of the talk, though the men had spoken quite audibly. This fourth player was a gaunt, towering old-timer whose face was seamed like a peach pit, whose head was bald and amazingly pale where his sombrero had protected his scalp from the sun. His slate-gray eyes were concentrated on the cards in his hand.

"I got openers," he said. And threw in two chips.

But the other three men, one by one, rapped "by" and tossed their cards in. The old timer stared at them and swore in disgust.

"First decent hand I get, and nobody stays!"

Johnny guessed it then: The old man was deaf! The other players were ganged up to skin him.

Johnny's first hot impulse was to curse the three men out as a bunch of tinhorns. But he had no weapon on him, in case they made a fight of it. Cooler second thought made him take the vacant chair at the table. He laid his ten-dollar bill on the table.

"Deal me in," he said.

The old timer's sun-squinted eyes looked him over.

"Sure, son."

But the other three men muttered.

"Ten bucks won't get you far in this game, kid."

"I'm payin' for the ride. Let's see how far I go."

This time, when the cards were dealt, there was no comparing of hands by the three men. And this was what Johnny had in mind. Now they'd have to play square.

He got three kings in his first five cards. His pulse leaped. Maybe he could win a pot.

"Damned old buzzard," one of the three men remarked to his two partners. "Look at 'im grin. Like he had five aces."

"Openers?" the big old timer asked.

Johnny nodded, and pushed in a chip.

Everybody stayed. The deaf man raised, and raised heavy.

"You damned old skinflint, you ain't scaring *me* out!" one of the three tinhorns snapped, pushing in chips.

Johnny's nerves crawled. Just because the old man was deaf was no excuse to cuss him out to his face.

The bet was raised and raised again. It took the last of Johnny's chips to stay.

"Two pair," one tinhorn grumbled. "Tried for a full house."

"Three of a kind," the second tinhorn snapped. "Sevens. What you hombres got?"

"Enough to beat you," said Johnny. "Three kings."

He laid down his cards. The deaf old-timer peered at them, his slate-gray eyes narrowed in their sun wrinkles, grinning as he said, "I got just two pair."

Johnny's heart leaped and he reached for the big pot.

"Hold on, son," the deaf man said. "The chips're mine."

"Three of a kind beat two pair!" Johnny snapped, indicating his three kings.

"No," said the deaf man. "I got two pair—*of jacks,*" and he laid down four jacks, four of a kind.

Johnny stared. Disgusted and heartsick, he blurted, "Why the damned old hog! Lettin' me think I'd won."

"What's that?"

The deaf old-timer let out a roar and jumped to his feet, reached long arms across the table, grabbed Johnny's shirt front in one hand and smashed his other fist into Johnny's face.

"No blasted squirt still wet behind the ears calls *me* a hog!" the old-timer yelled, and hit Johnny a second time.

Dazedly Johnny lurched to his feet, kicking his chair over. Again the towering old-timer hit him, and Johnny staggered back. Twisting away from another blow, Johnny smashed his fist to the old-timer's jaw. The deaf man crumpled back, crashing over a table and banging up against the wall. But he was tough. Up he came, tugging at his belt, whipping out a pistol.

Johnny flung at him in a headlong dive. The gun roared almost in his face, the slug whipping past his ear. He knocked the old man staggering against the wall, and wrenched the pistol from his gnarled fist. But the old-timer's hand closed on a bottle knocked from the upset table. He brought that bottle down savagely onto Johnny's head, and Johnny slumped senseless to the floor.

The old-timer lurched erect and kicked Johnny. Kicked him in the side. Drew back his foot to kick him again. Then the bouncer smacked the towering deaf man behind the ear with a blackjack, and the old-timer crumpled where he stood. . . .

WHEN Johnny came to his senses, he was lying on a cot in the one livery stable of Argus, and the old-timer was putting a towel wrung out in cold water on Johnny's head.

"Son, that barkeep tossed us both out into the gutter. Seein' as how I was to blame for sort of leadin' you astray, as it were, I fetched you on in here. Feelin' terrible?"

"I feel like a Piute tried to scalp me with a stone hatchet," Johnny admitted.

The old-timer chuckled. "I sure hit you a nasty wallop with that bottle. Care for a drink of whiskey?"

"I reckon not," Johnny said. Then as the old man shrugged, and put back the bottle he'd picked up, Johnny blurted, "Say, I thought you were deaf!"

"I am."

"Then how in blazes can you answer questions?"

But the big old man was corking the bottle, and didn't answer—and then Johnny understood. The old man was a skilled lip reader. . . . During that poker game, when the other players revealed their cards to each other, they held their hands up in front of their mouths, to hide their lips. When Johnny had angrily called the old man a hog, he had not shielded his mouth—so the burly old-timer had understood.

"What's your name, son?" the old-timer asked. "My name's Jefferson Hawes. Deefie Hawes, they call me."

Johnny started to answer and choked up.

Jeff Hawes! This towering, tough old heller was Jeff Hawes!

Jeff Hawes was the man he had come to Argus to find.

Some months ago, Johnny Cagle had received a wildly enthusiastic letter from his father:

> Johnny, at the 200-foot level of the old mine I found a quartz that'll pay $190 a ton in gold and silver, worked by modern methods. Worlds of it! We're rich, boy. Controlling interest in the mine is owned by an old coot named Jeff Hawes, but I've already bought an option from him. He's willing to sell out for $15,000. I'll have to borrow the money, but I'll get it—and then it's Easy Street for us! The world's our oyster, son!

Johnny's father had borrowed that $15,000 from friends, leaving some Los Angeles property and a life insurance policy as security. But after he had bought that mine and started working it, the rich ore petered out. Not $190 ore did he have, but rock that paid less than $1 a ton. Malcolm Cagle had paid back that money he had borrowed, however. By means of the life insurance policy and a .45 caliber bullet through his head.

And the man who had sold him that no-good mine was a big, stoop-shouldered, bald-headed old harpy by the name of Jefferson Hawes. . . .

"Did you lose all your money in that poker game, lad?" Hawes asked.

Johnny nodded.

"Then how about shovelin' ore on my claim for a couple weeks? Earn yourself a little grubstake."

Johnny thought, thought hard—and nodded.

"Fine! Let's haul out of here now, and travel in the cool of night. We'll get some sleep at Oak Grove after sunup. What's your name, boy?"

"John—John Malcolm," said Johnny. Something inside of Johnny squirmed at the lie. Inwardly Johnny promised himself that he'd tell Hawes his right name when at last the right time came.

DEEFIE HAWES' claim was in a tributary gorge opening off of Wildrose Canyon in the Panamints. It was an old claim that had been abandoned some forty-fifty years. Deefie told Johnny that he had pushed the tunnel some twenty feet deeper into the slope and found, he said, ore that would pay $150 a ton and more. He was sacking ore to show to prospective buyers.

Johnny had learned a little about gold mining from his father. The ore didn't look like $150 rock to him.

At supper one evening, Johnny said, "I've heard a lot about salting a mine, but I guess that doesn't happen nowadays."

Old Deefie shot a hard look at him, but nodded.

"'Course not, you can't fool nobody saltin' a mine nowadays. But back when it was all placer minin'—say, I've heard of the damnedest tricks! Fixin' to trim a sucker, a man would wash a pan of dirt right before the sucker's eyes, but the smart hombre would have gold dust mixed with clay up under his fingernails! He'd dabble his fingers in the water as he washed a pan of gravel, and the clay would melt and drop the gold dust into the pan. Then, by God, that sample panful of dirt would show color! Yessiree, Johnny, there's lots of smart dodges. I've heard of men who'd load a cigarette with gold dust, and they'd smoke over a pan they was washing and let the ashes fall into the sample dirt. Sure enough, that pan would show rich pay dirt when he got through washing!"

"That was placer mining. How about hard rock mining?" Johnny asked. "Are there ways to salt a claim like this one of yours, for instance?"

Old Deefie's keen eyes narrowed a moment. He shrugged.

"Sure, there's ways, I reckon. Like fillin' shotgun shells with gold dust and blastin' the dust into the rock. But that trick's older'n Moses' beard. Buy-

ers nowadays go into the tunnel and shoot some dynamite to get fresh samples deep out of the rock." And old Deefie changed the subject. "Let's get some sleep. Tomorrow's another day."

But Johnny wondered: What trick did you use to fool my father? What sneaking, foxy stunt did you put over on him?

At the end of two weeks, Deefie Hawes paid Johnny off—mostly in supplies and a burro. And Johnny hiked up-canyon, as if to prospect on his own.

Actually, Johnny hid the burro in the brush. And Johnny stole back to Deefie's camp to watch him from a *toyon* thicket.

Late that day, Johnny saw old Deefie take a syringe and squirt some kind of liquid into sacks of sample ore he had stacked up to show a prospective buyer of the claim. That wasn't all Johnny saw. He watched as Deefie Hawes took sticks of dynamite from his cache, and he saw Deefie prod tiny holes into the dynamite sticks and load the holes with gold dust.

"So that's it!" Johnny realized. "He squirted some chemical solution into those ore sacks to make his one-dollar ore look like two-hundred-dollar ore! That ore will lure a buyer out here to look at the mine. Then Deefie'll act honest as the day is long. He'll say, 'Hell, don't take my word that the claim's a bonanza. Go on into the tunnel and blast some fresh rock down for yourself and see how rich it is. Here! Here's dynamite. Go on down to the ore face and prove to your own satisfaction that I'm sellin' you a million dollars for the price of a medium-sized drunk!"

With heartache, Johnny wondered: Was this the trick that Deefie Hawes had used to swindle his father?

Johnny waited until Deefie stalked off down-canyon with his water buckets, headed for the spring. Then Johnny walked into camp and found that syringe which Deefie had used to squirt something into his ore sacks. From the syringe Johnny spilled some of the remaining liquid into a cup. Carefully he replaced the syringe and left the camp.

And next morning, Johnny headed down-trail to Argus.

On that long tramp, Johnny worked out a scheme—to show Deefie Hawes up as a swindler, to give the towering old hellion a long, deep draught of his own medicine. . . .

In Argus, Johnny went to Monte Williams, the assayer, and showed him that liquid he'd taken from Deefie's syringe.

"It's gold chloride solution," Williams said.

Next Johnny walked into the Oro Peso Hotel.

Though early in the evening, there were a lot of people in the lobby of the hotel. Over the desk was a big sign: *Old-Timers Dance Tonight.* The floor had been waxed; and at the back chairs were being arranged for musicians.

Mary came to the desk. She was dressed for the occasion in a flounced and beaded gown over myriad petticoats, low cut about a dazzlingly white youthful bosom and slendering down to a tiny waist in front, and bending out in a coy bustle behind. Earrings of amethysts matched the violet blue of her eyes.

She saw Johnny and came toward him. He stared at her, something so young and awed and hungering in his dark eyes that impulsively she squeezed his arm and drew him toward some chairs.

"That's a pretty dress," he stammered.

She smiled. "All except its odor of mothballs! It was my grandmother's. She wore it here in the Oro Peso at the first ball given in the district, in '75. But, Johnny, tell me about yourself! You went off without even having supper with us last time. What are you doing?"

"Prospecting, just now. Say, Mary—

"Yes?"

"If I should need some money for development work on a claim, you

know anybody in Argus who'd lend it to me?"

"Johnny, if you go to anybody but me for favors, I'll never speak to you again!" She leaned close to him, put her slim hand on his arm. "I want you to know something, Johnny. Your Dad helped Mother and me. He was the finest, decentest man I ever knew. We were trying to run an outfitting store here, and were starving. Mal Cagle helped us. Loaned us money, and got his friends to stay here in the hotel and all—and believe me, I wouldn't have made good here but for him!" She turned her face away for a moment, her fine eyes bright with tears. "I bawl wh-whenever I think of how he— But, Johnny, I got cash in the safe. Will a thousand dollars be enough to start with?"

"Five hundred will be plenty," he said.

JOHNNY spent most of that money buying supplies. Then he went prospecting, working northward from Argus.

Inside of a week he found the kind of claim he wanted.

High in a gulch on the shoulder of Telescope Peak, he found a wiry little prospector named Shorty Norris camped by a prospect hole that cut some forty feet into the hillside. Johnny stopped for supper. Johnny walked into the tunnel and examined it, and his pulse raced. This claim was made to order for his purpose. The tunnel cut through rock that was porous, shot through with seams and fissures.

"Norris, I'd like to buy this claim of yours."

"Hell's fire, boy, it ain't mine. Man name of Morney dug it nigh thirty year ago. But he never even filed on it. Nobody ever filed on it. There ain't enough gold ore in that hole to put in a gnat's eye. I know. I just wasted a week makin' sure."

Nevertheless, Johnny paid him fifty dollars for all rights to the claim.

Norris left hurriedly next morning, as if afraid Johnny would come to his senses and demand his money back.

Johnny worked hard, the next few days. Into the rock, above his mine tunnel, he drilled four parallel holes. Drilled them back some twenty-five feet. Then he prepared a gold chloride solution with the materials he had brought. Into the four parallel holes he forced that gold chloride by means of a hose, so that the solution would seep down through the porous rock, permeating its seams and fissures, being absorbed as if by a hungry sponge.

Finished, Johnny looked over the claim, and his lean chest lifted in a shaky breath as he murmured, "All set."

When he showed up at old Deefie Hawes' claim again, the burly old man grinned and joked, "Well, found a bonanza, youngster?"

"Don't know but what I have, Deefie."

Deefie slapped his thigh and guffawed.

"Ain't been here a month, and thinks he's found a mine!"

Johnny tossed him some samples of rock. "Look at 'em."

The grin faded from the old man's seamed face as he turned those fragments in his huge, gnarled hands.

"You—you actually found rock like this? Where?"

"In an old, abandoned prospect hole on Telescope Peak. I'm no mineral man. I figured I'd be smart to look where somebody else had already found enough ore sign to start a prospect hole."

"That was smart, boy. Damn smart," Deefie said with grudging respect, his eyes again studying the specimens. "God'l'—mighty! This sure looks like —Tell you what! I'll hike up to your claim and take a look at what you got there."

"Thanks, old-timer! That's swell of you."

"'T'ain't nothin'. I like to lend a young fellow a hand."

"Yeah," said Johnny, turning his face away so that Deefie could not read his lips. "But this time that lending hand of yours is going to get burnt clear to the elbow!"

Deefie picked some drills and selected a dozen sticks of dynamite from his cache. Then they set out for Telescope Peak.

First thing the old man did when they reached Johnny's claim was go into the tunnel and hammer off fragments of rock. Studying them, Deefie shook his head in stubborn amazement. Then he got his dynamite and set a blast. When the dust had settled, he scooped up specimens torn from deep in the rock. Twice he blasted. And the final specimens excited him more than the first had.

He said, "Johnny, my friend Colton over at the Wildrose Mine is an assayer. Let me take some of this ore to 'im. I'll be back by noon tomorrow."

Johnny's dark young eyes burned with moody satisfaction as Deefie Hawes drove a burro-load of ore down the trail. . . .

The first thing that old Deefie said, when he came striding back into camp next morning, was, "Johnny, I'll buy your claim!"

"You mean I really got a pay streak? What did the assays show?" Johnny asked eagerly.

"Yeah, you got a mine," Deefie admitted. "Sell out to me, boy! I'll pay you five thousand for the claim."

But Johnny said, "Gosh, if I got a bonanza here, I better rush down to Lone Pine and file on this claim before anybody tries jumpin' it!"

"Damn it, it ain't no bonanza! Just a good— Look, Johnny, I'll pay you $10,000 for this hole in the ground!"

Johnny said, "What did the assays show, Deefie?"

"Fair values, just fair! Johnny, I'm goin' to be honest with you. I'll pay you all I got for this mine. I got nigh $17,000 in the Lone Pine Bank. I'll pay you $16,000 for this claim. Cash money, Johnny! That's as fair an offer as you could get from anybody. I swear it is! 'Cause, Johnny, it takes plenty cash to build a road to haul out your ore, to bring in muckers and machinery. It takes plenty savvy to keep from puttin' more money into the ground than you take out! I'm advisin' you like a father, Johnny. You take the good hard cash and let me have the headaches of makin' a mine out of this hole in the ground!"

Johnny hesitated, looked down the canyon, and bit his lip and rubbed his chin . . . and sighed, and nodded.

"If you put it like that, Deefie, I'll sell."

WITH a stub of an indelible pencil, Deefie wrote out a check, while Johnny worked on a bill of sale.

Suddenly Johnny frowned. "How do I know your check is good?"

"You're protected, Johnny," Deefie said. "Write in the bill of sale that it's conditional upon your cashing the check and actually receiving the $16,000. See? If you don't get the money, I don't get the mine."

"That's right. And while I'm in Lone Pine, Deefie, I'll file on the claim in your name. I'll be coming back to Argus. I'll leave the recorder's receipt for you down there at the Oro Peso Hotel."

"I'll meet you there, Johnny!" Deefie promised.

An hour later, Johnny started down the trail. And as he strode along, he bawled out a song about *Little Ah Sid, a Chinee kid.* He didn't sing it well, but he did sing it loud. For it was really a shout of triumph. . . .

He camped on the trail, and next afternoon he was in Argus. He had several hours to wait for the bus to Lone Pine.

He walked into the *Oro Peso* Hotel.

Mary Stewart saw him, and left her place at the desk to come meet him, her sweet face lighting up. She wore

a neat yellow dress that set off the bronzy gold of her shining hair.

"Nice to see you, Johnny! Sit down, here. Where've you been? What've you done?"

His pulse was racing. Somehow, she always sent a tingle of excitement through him.

"Mary, I'll be able to pay back that five hundred you loaned me."

"You found a pay streak, Johnny?"

"And sold it!"

"Oh!" The pleasure suddenly faded from her blue eyes, and she became very sober and thoughtful. She leaned closer across the table. "Johnny, an old-timer named Shorty Norris was in here the other day. He told me he'd sold you a hole in the ground. That wasn't where you made your strike, was it?"

Johnny flushed hot.

"Sure it was! I just drove a pick deeper'n that little runt ever did, and I hit the pay streak."

"I see." She didn't say anything for a bit, just looked at him. His flush deepened. "Who did you sell your claim to, Johnny?"

"To—to old Deefie Hawes," he snapped out.

"It's funny, Johnny, but when it's deep in a man's bones to be frank and honest, it's hard for him to be anything else."

"What're you driving at?"

Her slim hand tightened on his arm.

"Johnny, understand this, I don't care a rap about old Deefie Hawes. He's got a lot on his conscience. But I *do* care about you, and, Johnny, two wrongs never made a right."

"I still don't know what you're talking about!"

"You know very well what I'm talking about." Spots of color burned into her cheek bones. "Johnny, Mal Cagle was the finest man I ever knew. I've been hoping that his son was just as fine. I—I've been counting on it."

"My father's got nothing to do with this!"

Mary drew back in her chair.

"And if you do anything that would've looked mean and small in his eyes, don't you ever set foot in here again!"

She jumped to her feet and walked away from him without a backward glance. . . .

Johnny took the big bus that rumbled across Panamint Valley and up through the Coso Range and north past Owens Lake to Lone Pine. Moodily he stared at the desert as the old bus jounced along. He had a check for $16,000 in his pocket; he had a dozen long cherished plans in the back of his mind. Now he could buy that horse ranch in Salinas Valley he so long had wanted. Now he could do a lot of ambitious things which so far had been nothing but daydreaming.

But somehow he didn't feel good about it.

"Damn it, Deefie Hawes had this coming to him!"

He had wreaked a harsh justice on the old swindler! What had Mary expected? That he would let old Deefie get away unhurt with his rotten gypping?

He reached Lone Pine late at night and went to the hotel. He slept restlessly, visions of a slim, lovely girl with shining red-gold hair vivid in his sleep.

The bank wasn't open when he finished breakfast next morning, so he went to the mining recorder's office. His business done there, he went to the bank and presented Deefie Hawes' check.

"Is it any good?"

The teller eyed the signature and nodded.

"Yes. Just about cleans out Mr. Hawes' account. Want it in bills of large denomination?"

JOHNNY caught the noon bus and by sundown was in Argus.

He went straight to the Oro Peso Hotel. The lobby was crowded with men—and old Deefie Hawes was there, as he'd said he would be, and he was in

a high mood. He whooped when he saw Johnny.

"The drinks're on me, everybody! Come on next door, I'm settin' 'em up! Johnny, I been tellin' the boys I bought a bonanza, and they're sayin' I'm a liar. Tell 'em, Johnny. Did I buy a mine from you or didn't I?"

Johnny's young face tightened. But he stepped up onto a chair and faced the crowd of excited men.

"Say, you made a gold strike, young fella?"

"Where at is this bonanza?"

"Tell it, boy!"

Johnny raised a hand for silence. He saw that Mary stood at the desk, listening.

"Yes," Johnny said hoarsely. "I sold Deefie Hawes a claim."

"A damn rich claim, too," old Deefie yelled. "But I paid the boy $16,000 for it! Which is a damn sight more than those mining sharps from Los Angeles'd pay a green kid like him! Johnny, you brought me back that recorder's filin' receipt?"

Johnny handed him an envelope with Deefie's name on it.

"Men," Johnny spoke on, his voice ringing out now, "I sold Deefie Hawes a mine. He paid me $16,000 for it. His whole pile, damn near. Deefie Hawes —the damnedest swindler in the Panamints, bought a mine off a green kid. Deefie Hawes, who's salted more no-count holes and palmed 'em off as bonanzas than any other crook in the desert, bought a mine off a green kid who doesn't know beans about minin'."

"Hey, Johnny!" Old Deefie protested, his weathered face getting red. "No use callin' names. I paid you plenty."

"Deefie Hawes, who knows more about making a gopher hole look like a bank vault than any highbinder in the district, paid $16,000 to a green kid for a claim," Johnny rasped, "that isn't worth the price of a bottle of beer! Because I *salted* that mine. It was a claim that Shorty Norris didn't even figure worth filing on, and I sold it to Deefie Hawes for his whole damn bank roll!"

Johnny's words left a stunned, flabbergasted silence on the room.

And Johnny added: "I used a trick I learned from Old Deefie himself, gold chloride solution. Only I used it in a way he never saw used before. I bored holes over his tunnel, and let a lot of the solution seep down through porous rock. And Deefie went into the prospect hole with his own dynamite, blasted out his own samples and forked over his whole bank roll like the greenest sucker that ever hit the Panamints!"

Old Deefie had turned white, his gray eyes popping. Now his seamed face went apoplectic with rage. His gnarled old fists knotted up and he strode toward Johnny as the crowd roared with laughter, shouted their guffaws, slapped their thighs with delight.

"Hold on! Hold on!" Deefie bellowed, raising his arms. "Listen to me a minute!"

"Old Deefie took by a tenderfoot!"

"Lord A'mighty! The old he-coon hisself skinned by a punk!"

"Hold on!" Deefie bawled. "I ain't been skinned. Hell's fire, I knew that mine was salted!"

The guffaws choked off. The room became very quiet. Old Deefie looked at Johnny, and Deefie's face was chagrined but not fighting mad; his anger was fading.

And Deefie said, "Gosha'mighty, you think after all these years that I've been —I mean, knowing all I do about how to salt a mine and use a gold chloride solution that I wouldn't be suspicious about a claim like Johnny's? Hell's fire, I didn't buy his claim for the gold that was in it. Lord A'mighty, no! Here's why I bought that mine!" He pulled a rock specimen from his pocket and held it aloft. "Workin' in that prospect hole, Johnny had uncovered a ledge of this rock. There's a war goin' on in Europe, and this country is storin' up metals for munitions, and a lot of ores have doubled and tripled in price.

"This ore is wolframite. Tungsten.

And it's sellin' for *six* times what it sold for two years ago!" His harsh old voice rang with triumph. "Cripes, no, I didn't buy a gold mine off of Johnny. I paid him $16,000 for a deposit of tungsten that'll make me independent-rich inside a year's time. *Now* laugh, you slobber-mouthed coyotes. Laugh *that* off!"

Old Deefie looked at Johnny, standing there, his lean young face set and stricken. And the crowd looked at Johnny, and none of them laughed. Only Deefie Hawes' heavy guffaws reechoed in the room.

An arm slipped through Johnny's. "Johnny—"

Mary drew him to a table at the back of the room.

"I'm sorry it had to work out like that, Johnny," Mary said. "And yet, I'm glad, too. Deefie Jones is everything in the way of a swindler that you said he was. Just the same, I'm glad you didn't gyp him out of his money."

"I tried to," Johnny blurted honestly.

"I know." Her slim fingers tightened on his hand. "But I don't think you'll try anything like that again. You've had your lesson. I—I'd rather have you poor, Johnny, and decent." She smiled at him, and his pulse leaped. "Johnny, you're going to have supper with Mother and me tonight. Then we'll sit in the parlor and you can tell me how you're going to spend your $16,000."

Johnny said, "Mary, I haven't got any $16,000." And Johnny said, "Look, Mary. Look now at old Deefie, *quick*."

Standing at the bar, old Deefie Hawes was opening that envelope which Johnny had given him. He took a paper out of it. He stared at the paper, his old eyes popping, his jaw dropping, color swiftly draining out of his weathered face.

"Mary," Johnny said, "old Deefie expected to find a filing receipt in that envelope. I was to file on that claim in his name after I cashed his $16,000 check. But, Mary, when it came right down to it, I just couldn't gyp old Deefie out of his whole bank roll. Not after what you said to me. So—so I never cashed Deefie's check at all. What he's just found in that envelope is not a filing receipt, but his own check, torn in two."

"Oh!" Mary stared at him. "Then—then he didn't actually buy your mine—"

"No. And I didn't file on it in his name. I filed on the claim in my own name," Johnny said. "So help me, it looks like *I* own a tungsten mine. And I got Deefie to thank for it!"

Mary smiled, threw back her head, and her silvery laughter pealed through the room.

Johnny looked at Deefie Hawes as the old gyp-artist stalked out of the hotel, shoulders bowed and chin sunk on his chest, slinking away from defeat and blasting ridicule. . . .

"Sometimes," Johnny now realized, "treating a man honestly is the best way to gyp him!"

There's an extra issue of

RANCH ROMANCES this month

Don't miss the Third October number

Jack Bickerdyke, Indian Fighter

By Frank Collinson

This is a tale of one of the men who tamed the American frontier, told by a friend of his, Frank Collinson, that grand old-timer whose memory is rich with the first-hand history of America.

IN THE fall of 1875 I got well acquainted with a buffalo hunter and Indian fighter by the name of Jack Bickerdyke. He was out after buffalo in the country around Beaver Creek in the Panhandle of Texas and what is now Oklahoma. And it was there, in his camp, and at later meetings with him that he told me these tales of Indian fighting that I am telling you.

Along about 1868 Bickerdyke was with Major Forsyth with the U. S. scouts on a prong of the Republican River in west Kansas. Major Forsyth was out scouting for Indians, and this was one time he found them. One night in September, 1868, Major Forsyth and his command were camped on the Arickaree. Of the fifty men with him forty-eight were scouts, one was a lieutenant, and one a doctor named Movers.

Just about dawn the next morning the guard gave the alarm—Indians. Every man was immediately on his feet, got his horse from the picket line, saddled him, and turned in the direction of the redskins. The Indians came on yelling, shaking buffalo robes and firing guns in an effort to stampede the horses. In this they were partly successful, getting the pack mules and a few horses.

Directly in front of the camp and in the Arickaree was an island about a hundred yards long and thirty wide. Scrub brush and willows grew on it, the only available cover. Major Forsyth was satisfied that the Indians they could see were only a part of the attacking party. So he ordered his men to get on the island. The few inches of water on one side and the dry sand on the others would impede the Indians' horses on a charge.

A few of the best marksmen, Bicker-

dyke among them, were to take cover near the banks. They had barely tied their horses to the brush when the entire band of Indians came on full tilt. Falling off their horses, they crept close to the island and at once began firing. So fast and accurate were they that in little more than an hour's time Major Forsyth had been shot twice, one shot breaking his leg, the doctor and two other men had been killed, a number of others wounded, and every horse had been shot down. However, the scouts had not been idle, as many dead and wounded Indians had been carried or dragged back out of sight or range.

Disabled as he was, Forsyth did not quit the command. Propped up on his elbow, he saw everything, and gave orders. While the best shots were keeping the Indians at their distance, other men were digging for life making rifle pits, using the dead horses for shelter. By nine o'clock the little party was in a better position for defense.

The Indians by now had realized their mistake by not charging at the start, and they now made preparations to do so. Under the command of Chief Roman Nose a band of three hundred well mounted Indians formed just beyond rifle shot and just below the island. This heavy skirmish line crept closer and closer with a fire so heavy and accurate that the scouts could not show head nor arm to return it. Forsyth put everything in readiness, ordered the guns of the dead and wounded to be loaded and placed near the best shots, on the side the charge was likely to be made.

When the fire of the Indian skirmishers had completely silenced the fire of the scouts, the signal was given and Roman Nose charged the island. But when his gallant command had gotten so near that the Indians on foot could no longer shoot for fear of hitting their own men, and the line of defense bristled with the steady defenders Forsyth shouted, "Shoot!" and the defense blazed death.

Roman Nose went down in the sand of the Arickaree to rise no more on his beloved hunting ground. The medicine man fell at the very foot of the defense line, at the very muzzles of their guns. Nothing could stand the cool and accurate fire of the whites. The Indians faltered, a wild yell came from the scouts. Another volley and the Indians broke and scattered beyond range. To make sure of Roman Nose, the finest warrior in the Cheyenne tribe, two or three of the best shots amongst the scouts filled him with lead.

The victory was won but at a terrible cost. Of the whole force of fifty-one men, twenty-three were dead or wounded. The Indians, badly disheartened by the loss of Roman Nose and the medicine man, made no more charges against the white men, but tried to kill off this small party of scouts by long-range shooting from the hills. They kept this up all day and at night moved up the creek. When it was dark Forsyth sent two of his scouts to try and reach the nearest fort, which was Wallace, some sixty miles away, to get help at once. Jack Bickerdyke was one of the two selected to try and reach the fort. He was young and light on foot—the horses were all dead.

They made it to the fort the second night after leaving. Meanwhile the Indians kept up the same type of fighting, on foot and at long range. That night Forsyth sent two more men with dispatches, but these men were driven back to the island by the Indians. On the third day it was seen that the Indians had about given up trying to kill off the whites. The main body of the redskins had no doubt gone for meat, but they left a number large enough to keep up a desultory shooting on these wounded and suffering men. That night Forsyth sent off two more men and, as they did not return, it was supposed that they had gotten through, which later turned out to be true.

On the fourth day the uninjured men for the first time had a chance to give attention to the wounded, but now

came another worse enemy than the Indians—hunger. During the first days of the siege they had had plenty of horse and mule meat, but by now it was rotten and the stench was almost unbearable. For all that it was all that they had to eat. On the ninth day of fighting and suffering the welcome reinforcements arrived, and this wounded and starving little party found relief. In this fight the Indians had nine hundred warriors, the whites fifty-one men in all. The Indians admitted a loss of seventy-five killed and many wounded.

N THE late Seventies when the silver boom started in the Black Range of New Mexico, the Hot Springs Apaches had their reservation on the Cuchillo, a tributary of the Rio Grande which flows into the river just below the Elephant Butte Dam. Of course there was no dam at the time. The head chief of this Apache tribe was the notorious Victoria, who was credited with being the best general of all New Mexico or Arizona Indians. I only saw him once, a short, heavy, bow-legged man, I should say about fifty years of age at that time.

He was never friendly with the whites. When they commenced to mine and overrun his reservation, he took to the rough country marauding and killing all that he could, the worst scourge ever in New Mexico. The U. S. troops at Fort Bayard were trying to catch up with him but to no avail. It was during these raids that Bickerdyke enlisted in the scouts at Fort Bayard. Late in 1878 he made his last raid in New Mexico. On it Victoria split his tribe.

Under the leadership of Geronimo half of the warriors went east to the Mescalero Reservation, raided south down the Sacramento Mountains, striking the Rio Grande below El Paso. They killed several Mexicans who were putting up hay, crossed the river into Mexico just below Guadalupe, Mexico, and went into the range of mountains just south of that place. The U. S. troops followed but never caught up with this band. Captain Bazler was camped at Ysleta with his company of rangers and followed up with the U. S. Cavalry.

Meanwhile old Victoria had gone south, passing down the Membres Valley and into Mexico near where Columbus, New Mexico, is now located, and passed Lake Guzman. The squaws and papooses were with him. This was familiar country to the Apaches. It had been theirs long before New Mexico was U. S. country. He continued on south, raiding and killing as far as Carrisal. There they stole a lot of horses, killed a lot of cattle, and leisurely went to the same mountains south of the Rio Grande where the other band was headed.

South of Guadalupe there is a canyon with mountains on both sides through which the old Chihuahua and El Paso trail made its way. This had been in use ever since there was any settlement on the Rio Grande. Old Victoria had a holdup place in the bluffs which commanded a lookout both up and down this old wagon route. This band of Victoria's were raiding both in Texas and Mexico. About this time a party of Mexicans, about fifteen or twenty citizens of Carrisal who had lost both cattle and horses from depredations by this band of Apaches, packed up and went to see if they could locate their horses. They followed the trail of the latest raiding party leading into this canyon. Victoria's scouts and lookouts, from the top of the mountain, saw these men and knew that they would come through the canyon.

The Indians went at once and hid in the rocks in the narrowest part of the canyon and waited for these Mexicans to come, which they did. When they had reached this Indian ambuscade the Indians opened fire on them, killed the entire party, took all they had, clothes and all, gathered up the bodies, threw

them in the rocks out of sight, and returned to their camp in the mountains. The Mexicans' friends and relatives never heard a word from them—it is nearly two hundred miles from Carrisal to this mountain. Carrisal waited two or three weeks and then organized another party to go in search. These took the same route. Again the Indians saw the party approaching and again hid in the same place. When this second party arrived at the scene of the massacre they saw evidence of a fight. They dismounted and commenced to look around and soon found the bodies of their friends. They then started to get the bodies together and see if the entire party had been killed. By the time they had gotten busy, the Indians commenced to shoot and kill. The Mexicans were about all shot down at the first volley.

Geronimo and Natchez, said to be one of the most desperate Indians in Arizona

Two Mexicans were on their horses riding around to see if there were any dead below where they had found the bodies. At the first shot they took one look, then started down the canyon. The Indians shot several times at the men, but the two managed to get to a point of the canyon between them and the Indians, and got away. They went to Villa Ahumada the next day and told how both parties had been ambushed and killed by the Apaches.

General Terrazas, a cousin of Don Louis Terrazas of Chihuahua, and who was in command of all that district, got all the soldiers he could from El Paso del Norte, now Juarez, and other places near there in his military zone, and started for the scene of the massacre. He asked the commander of the American soldiers who had followed Victoria's band to the Rio Grande, and also Capt. Baylor with his troop of Texas Rangers to help kill or capture Victoria and his raiders. That just suited the Americans. They crossed into Mexico just as soon as they could pack up and start, fording the Rio Grande near Guadalupe. Then both American and Mexican troops started for the mountains where Victoria was holed up in an almost impregnable natural fortress.

The first day they had several brushes with the Indians, who shot from the mountains, but no one was hurt. By then they knew just where old Victoria was and decided to storm his holdout. Victoria had no such idea. He had seen the Americans as well as the Mexicans and had already sent the women and children south to a mountain which stood alone, about fifty miles below, in a fairly open country, the Sierra Tres Costillas. The next day the American soldiers and the Texas Rangers went up the mountain where Victoria was holed up. They had to go on foot. The Indians were behind the rocks and kept retreating. The Mexican troops tried to get around to try and cut off all ways of escape. There was a lot of climbing and shooting and several men were wounded, but no one was killed on the American side. Bickerdyke said he thought the only reason that there were no white men killed was that the Indians were shooting downhill and overshot every time. One ranger had his hat shot off, but before the

Indian could shoot again the ranger shot him dead. Several Indians were killed.

The U. S. troops and rangers fought all the way to the Indian camp only to find it vacated. By then the Indians had retreated, and they could get around much faster than the whites. All that the soldiers could do was to burn what they could find and take their wounded back to camp. Bickerdyke, coming up the mountain, had jumped an Indian out from behind a big rock where he had been shooting at the Americans. The Indian came out shooting, and got Bickerdyke through the leg, though he did not break any bone. It was a small-caliber gun he had and it did not tear much of

An Apache they called Dutchy

a hole; but when the Indian turned to run Bickerdyke shot him clear through with a Government carbine. He told me that the Indian had very little clothing on; there was nothing worth taking but his scalp and Bickerdyke did not care to have that. It was against the U. S. orders to mutilate any dead Indian.

The Indians had scattered in this rough mountain, and after dark they went to the Tres Costillas (Three Ribs.) The next day both American and Mexican troops followed and surrounded the mountain. The Indians were now bottled up. When General Terrazas saw where the Indians were he told the American commander and Capt. Baylor of the rangers that they had better go back to the U. S. A., as they were now seventy-five miles into Mexico, and that he could handle the situation. Of course the Americans thought it was only fair that they should be in at the death or capture. Terrazas insisted that they return to the U. S. A., so all they could do was go back, the whole command sore.

The day after the Americans left, Terrazas commenced his cleanup. Victoria had seen the Americans go, so he and his warriors showed fight from the start. A Tarumare Indian scout who was with the command got a good shot at Victoria and killed him dead. The Mexicans then climbed the mountain, killed the whole band, men, women and children, who were badly demoralized by the death of Victoria and put up a poor fight. The Mexican Government gave this Tarumare Indian a fine silver mounted rifle.

The night before the final fight, a small band of Indians escaped the Mexican outposts, crossed back into Texas and hid in the Eagle mountains. Capt. Baylor heard they were there, so he took his troop of rangers and a few Ysleta Indians and went to this mountain. The Apaches saw them coming and made a hasty get-away. The rangers followed them up and killed and scattered this last small bunch of Victoria's tribe, but that is another story. Bickerdyke and several more wounded were taken back to Fort Bayard.

I should say that at this time, 1879, there was no railroad in any part of this country and only poor telegraph service.

FTER Bickerdyke had got well of his wound, at Fort Bayard, he met up with three men just from Texas who were on their way to the silver mines in the Black Range of New Mexico, having heard of the mining boom there. They located at Chloride and took up a claim which they named the Colossus. It turned out well and they sold it for sixty thousand dollars thus getting fifteen thousand each.

One of these men, whom I knew well, I met in El Paso and went back to camp with him. There I met Bickerdyke again, for the last time. He was having a fine time playing poker, drinking whiskey and blowing in his fifteen thousand.

When his money was gone Bickerdyke again joined the Scouts. General Crook was in charge and Bickerdyke was assigned to the command of Captain Crawford, who had about three hundred men, Apache scouts, several American scouts and U. S. troops.

Geronimo, chief of the Chiricahuas —Apache Indians—had left the reservation in the White Mountains of Arizona and gone on the warpath. He is credited with killing something like five hundred men, women and children before he finally gave up to the U. S. troops in 1886. Capt. Crawford had followed these hostiles from Fort Apache into Old Mexico. The Mexican Government had not only given permission for the U. S. troops to enter Mexico, but had asked their aid to try and kill or capture Geronimo.

I saw Geronimo and about twenty of the worst killers at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Among them was Natchez, who was said to be the most desperate Indian in Arizona. He was a tall, slim Indian well over six feet in height. He was a son of Cochise and a grandson of Mangus Colorado. Strange to relate, a grandson of his enlisted in the U. S. Army this year and is now a soldier at Fort Bliss, Texas.

By November 1885, Capt. Crawford and his command were well down into Mexico. These scouts, troopers and Indians were in all kinds of clothing, no regular uniforms: the Indians were in their native dress. This nondescript dress no doubt caused the death of several men.

The Geronimo band's depredations had been worse on the Mexicans than in the U. S. A. The Mexican regular soldiers and irregular parties were following these hostiles wherever they could find a trail. Capt. Santa Ana Perez of the Mexican Army was hot on their trail, with about a hundred fifty Mexican soldiers, and they also had native Mexican Indian Scouts who were expert trailers. They had followed Geronimo and his band for seventeen days, had found a fresh Indian trail and were close behind these Indians. They were sure that it was Geronimo's band—or thought they were—but it was part of Capt. Crawford's group. The Mexicans were sure that it was Geronimo's main camp that they had found at last, and without a word or sign they opened fire. The Americans returned the fire with deadly effect.

Suddenly a Mexican called, "Stop shooting, that is the American camp." Capt. Perez gave the signal to cease firing. But just as he called the order a Mexican had taken deliberate aim at the American he saw speak to the Indian, and as the bugle sounded the call he shot the bullet striking Capt. Crawford in the head and killing him instantly. An Apache that they called Dutchy, a great friend of Crawford, caught him as he fell. Then he, with deliberate and deadly aim, killed the Mexican who had shot his captain. Before the shooting ceased, two other Americans were mortally wounded. Jack Bickerdyke was one of them.

The Americans had not been slow in returning the fire. Capt. Maurico Coreder was shot dead. He had seen much service with the Mexican Army fighting Indians. He was at the battle of the Tres Costillas when Victoria was killed. Several more of the Mexicans were killed and wounded.

Capt. Crawford's body was taken to Nacosari and temporarily buried. Bickerdyke and the other American scouts were buried where they fell. This shooting came near breaking up all friendly relations with the Mexicans, but Capt. Santa Ana Perez was finally acquitted of all blame. He said that he had not recognized any American uniforms and that the Indians in the American camp were just like all Apaches that he had seen. In the death of Capt. Crawford the U. S. lost a fine soldier.

Cowboy Lore

Leaves From a Cowboy's Sketch Book

By Walt Mead

The Orphan

THAT summer on the Heart H range was a sweltering one, so hot that the landscape seemed to wither and squirm under the blinding downpour. You had to squint hard, even in the merciful shade of cottonwood clumps, to distinguish a horse from a cow a mile or so away. The figures seemed to bob up and down, trembling and shimmering in the heat waves. First they were cows with long, curving horns, then suddenly you saw your mistake and you just *knew* they were wild range horses with very long manes and foretops and vice versa.

Well, if they were horses there certainly was something wrong because the Heart H horse range lay way to the south, and I was being paid to see that nothing but Heart H cattle grazed this particular territory. I rode down a slope, my shoulders on fire, to investigate the scene.

Halfway down the rocky incline June Bug threw up his head. I was beginning to think he too was seeing things until I caught a flash of white movement in a clump of bullberry bushes. There a colt stood, four feet planted wide apart, his blazed face swaying and jerking and about the sorriest-looking range baby I ever laid eyes on. He twitched his ears when June Bug snorted, then nickered, and he probably would have acknowledged the greeting had not his tongue protruded blue and swollen from between parched lips. The reason for June Bug's snort was genuine enough. A heap of brown lay partly hidden beneath the thorny brush, all that remained of the colt's mother.

June Bug made it to number one line camp three miles away, in record time. I couldn't help thinking what the foreman would say as I reached for the canned cow. A mental picture of his cold gray eyes and black, cropped mustache sprang up before me. Old Croppy, as we called him, would have settled the matter definitely for the orphan with a sixgun.

When I rode up, the little fellow seemed to know help was at hand. He took a few faltering steps toward June Bug and collapsed. I didn't get much riding done that afternoon. Every hour or so I'd drop over and give him a drink, and by the time the sun had touched the purple rim of the Belts, he was on his feet once more, nosing around, taking a real interest in life.

When I rode up again for the last time he followed June Bug right into camp without a whimper.

June Bug adopted him immediately, as geldings often do, zealously keeping his big muscular frame between the waif and the six other saddle horses in my string. They took note of June Bug's flattened ears and further warnings were unnecessary.

It wasn't long till I had the youngster weaned, but not until I'd bribed Phil, the camp-tender, on one of his irregular pack trips for an extra case of condensed milk. He consented reluctantly, with a doleful expression, muttering something about Old Croppy.

In six weeks time I had the colt nibbling grass, sourdough bread, and strangely enough he developed a taste for flapjacks smeared with syrup. I promptly named him Flapjack. And the name stuck, even after he had passed into other hands, a grown cowhorse and one of the best. I lost my job over that blazed-faced colt and even to this day I can't help but judge a man by his feelings and actions toward animals, especially horses.

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10-10-41

Texas Fire-Eater

By Robert Dale Denver

THE STORY SO FAR:

KIT, OREN, WAYNE, RED and TOMMY BARLOW, owners of the Barlow herds.

DICK CHALLONER, a Texas ranger.

DOC GOSSETT, guardian of the younger Barlows and trail boss.

TIM and MARTHY CONE, old Barlow retainers.

COL. MACKLIN, owner of the Santa María Ranch; ROSETTE, his daughter.

BLACKIE JACKSON and the DOBLE BROTHERS, rustlers.

DEACON MEADOWS, a Barlow herd boss; JOE, his brother.

GITCH FLEER, a crook and former Barlow herd boss.

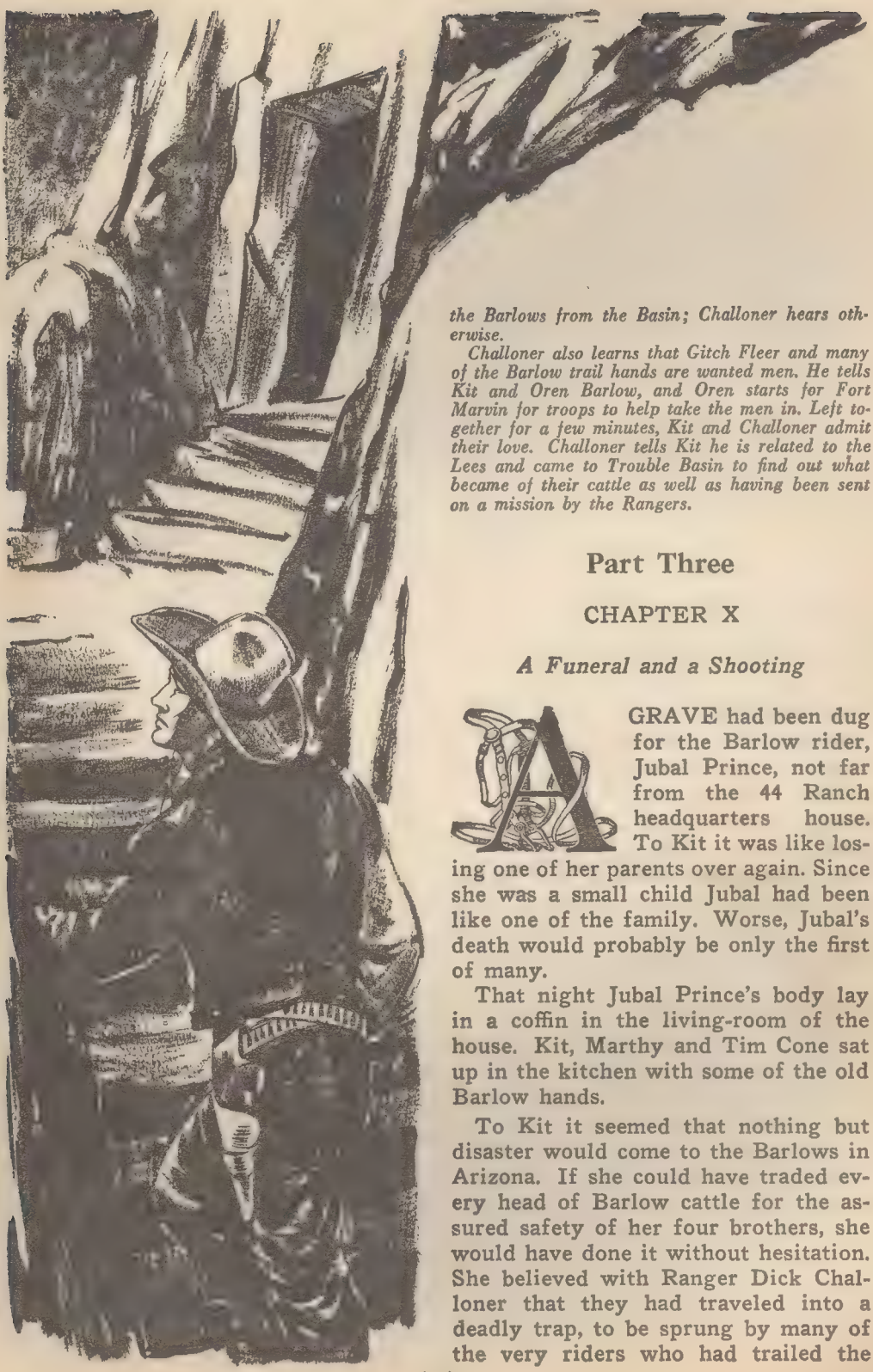
The Barlows are trailing their cattle from Texas to Trouble Basin in Arizona Territory where they have bought the 44 Ranch from Col. Macklin. This ranch had for a short time been owned by the Lees of Texas who were killed in a range war with the Trouble Basin ranchers. The ranch reverted back to Col. Macklin through Rosette, who had married Clayton Lee.

Led by Gitch Fleer, the Barlow trail hands shoot up the New Mexico town of Plaza Paz. To prevent their cattle from being held in retaliation, the Barlows immediately shove over the Arizona line. Deputy Baca is shot near their camp and dies. Doc Gossett claims he said Apaches got him. The men draw lots to see who will take his body to Plaza Paz and Challoner, through Gossett's trickery, is chosen.

At Plaza Paz he tells Sheriff Templin that he is a ranger in search of Blackie Jackson. He and Templin arrange for him to be chased out of town and to the camp of the Doble Brothers, followers of Jackson. There he meets Jackson and convinces them all he is a wanted man, even joining in their plans to prey on the Barlow herds, pretending to work from the inside.

That night the Barlow camp is attacked by a band of supposed Apaches. Challoner, on his way back, learns that they are white men talking Spanish. When he tells this, Gitch Fleer picks a quarrel with him, and Challoner wounds Fleer. Gossett fires both men, claiming they are trouble-makers.

Col. Macklin and Rosette welcome the Barlows to Trouble Basin, and Rosette immediately strikes up a flirtation with Wayne Barlow. The Colonel gives a party for the Barlows, but none of the Trouble Basin people come. Then a rider tears in to tell them that the Barlow men have got into a fight in Apache Ford. The Barlow men claim they went to town peacefully and were attacked. Jubal Prince, one of them, was killed. Doc Meadows and his brother, Joe, assert that the attack was engineered by a rancher named Kenyon trying to drive



the Barlows from the Basin; Challoner hears otherwise.

Challoner also learns that Gitch Fleer and many of the Barlow trail hands are wanted men. He tells Kit and Oren Barlow, and Oren starts for Fort Marvin for troops to help take the men in. Left together for a few minutes, Kit and Challoner admit their love. Challoner tells Kit he is related to the Lees and came to Trouble Basin to find out what became of their cattle as well as having been sent on a mission by the Rangers.

Part Three

CHAPTER X

A Funeral and a Shooting

A GRAVE had been dug for the Barlow rider, Jubal Prince, not far from the 44 Ranch headquarters house. To Kit it was like losing one of her parents over again. Since she was a small child Jubal had been like one of the family. Worse, Jubal's death would probably be only the first of many.

That night Jubal Prince's body lay in a coffin in the living-room of the house. Kit, Marthy and Tim Cone sat up in the kitchen with some of the old Barlow hands.

To Kit it seemed that nothing but disaster would come to the Barlows in Arizona. If she could have traded every head of Barlow cattle for the assured safety of her four brothers, she would have done it without hesitation. She believed with Ranger Dick Challoner that they had traveled into a deadly trap, to be sprung by many of the very riders who had trailed the

Barlow herds from Texas. The same cowboys who had driven the cattle over long desert stretches and had risked their lives to stop stampedes were revealed as desperadoes who had likely taken their jobs only in a scheme against their employers. Doc Gossett could not be blamed for having hired the outlaws, Kit admitted, and yet there was a lingering suspicion in Kit's mind that he might have known very well the kind of men he hired. If not, why had he hinted to her that it would be the worse for the Barlows if Kit did not look favorably on his marriage offer?

Past midnight Tim and the other men insisted that Marthy and Kit go to bed, but they were up long before dawn of a day that was clouded, with a raw wind sweeping off the peaks. Tim Cone poured Kit a cup of hot coffee strong enough to float a horseshoe.

"Tryin' to make a coffee fiend outa a innercent young girl," Marthy accused her husband. "If you make coffee, why don't you use a little water in it?"

"Too much coffee's been sp'iled by usin' too much water," said Tim. "It's a cheerin' cup, coffee. It's allus darkest right afore the dawn," he went on, noting the girl's discouragement. "Jubal died quick and easy. He was old and he told me more'n once he didn't care when the trail ended for him. Death's something we all got to meet sooner or later, one way or another. It's about the commonest thing that happens to man. Next to bein' born."

Marthy Cone and Kit prepared breakfast for Tim, Red and Tommy who were staying at the house. In late afternoon all four trail herd crews rode up to attend the funeral. Redheaded Wayne, the second oldest brother, was there, and of course Red and Tommy. Both her younger brothers were wiping tears out of their eyes, trying to keep from showing their grief. Only Oren, the oldest of the Barlows, was missing, having gone to Fort Marvin, as only Kit knew, to ask that troops be sent into Trouble Basin.

The ceremony was simple. They had not brought in a minister; they wanted no minister from Apache Ford where Jubal had met a bushwhacking death. Instead Deacon Meadows, the Bible-reading boss of one of the herds, delivered a short and simple but heartfelt sermon. The Deacon's father had been a preacher, and the Deacon knew the Bible well and he had also the emotions of a range man, repressed but nevertheless deep, in the presence of the death of a comrade.

This was one man at least, thought Kit as she listened to Deacon Meadows, who could not even be suspected of being an outlaw. Meadows' face was benign, like that of an old-fashioned country preacher. The Deacon's brother, Joe, who had said that the Apache Ford ranchers had attacked the trail hands in the guise of Apaches, looked much like the Deacon.

After the sermon they carried the coffin to the grave and mounded the clay soil up over it. Then soberly the men went back to work, riding to their wagon camps. Temporarily the funeral at least had quenched the bitter war talk of the previous day. They were beginning to cut out cattle from Oren's herd, getting ready to locate them in the canyons under the peaks.

Toward evening the sun and a clearing blue sky brought back most of Kit's customary cheerfulness. Long before now her oldest brother, Oren, had reached Fort Marvin to ask the intervention of soldiers. They might already be on their way to Trouble Basin; cavalrymen with pack mules to establish a camp and to remain until the danger of more fighting was over.

There had been no word from Oren during the day, however. She was getting a little anxious about him when, after dark, Asa Harby, one of the old-time Barlow hands, came into the room where Kit and Tim Cone, by lamplight, were unpacking boxes from the big freighter wagons. Asa's seamed old face was so solemn that Kit knew instantly something had happened. Something bad. "Oren?" she asked.

"How'd you know?" asked Asa Har-

by, surprised. "Yes, it's Oren. Wayne sent me up to tell you folks."

Kit's heart seemed to stop. Then "What happened to him?" she demanded, catching Asa's arm.

"Spit it out, ding it!" said Tim Cone. "What happened to Oren? He's not dead, I reckon."

"Not dead," said Harby. "But near it. One slug in his back and another bullet fractured his skull. He was found not far from Apache Ford this afternoon. A freighter run on to him layin' 'longside the trail with his horse grazin' not far off. Freighter brung him into town and the doc there said he had to be rushed to the army hospital at Fort Marvin. They'd sent for Wayne and him and Doc Gossett took Oren over. There wasn't time to send for you, Kit, and you couldn't do nothin' for Oren nohow. He's plumb out'n his head; don't reckernize nobody—not even Wayne."

Kit stood stock-still, her mind a turmoil. Oren had left the night before for Fort Marvin and he was going there now, but badly wounded. Only one man knew that Oren had started for Fort Marvin and on what errand. That man was Ranger Dick Challoner. A suspicion flashed into her head and instantly passed. The Texas ranger had had nothing to do with the ambushing of Oren; she'd stake her life on that.

"It was some of them polecat ranchers round Apache Ford that bushwhacked him," said Harby.

"No doubtin' that, I guess," said Tim Cone grimly.

"I say there is doubt!" stated Kit violently. "Everything can't be blamed on those ranchers. Someone else might have had a reason for shooting Oren."

Harby and Tim both stared at her, startled by the girl's vehemence. She was on the point of telling them of the list of names Oren had carried, the Barlow trail drivers who were outlaws wanted back in Texas. She decided against it. It might be better to keep that a secret, as well as the fact that Challoner had provided the list.

There was nothing to do but hope for Oren, the steady, level-headed one of the two older brothers, to pray that there might not be another grave beside Jubal Prince's.

Again that night they sat late in the kitchen, Tim Cone drinking his usual succession of cups of coffee. And again Kit went to bed finally, only to be awakened as horses came to the door. She got up and hurried out to the kitchen. Wayne and Doc Gossett were the arrivals; they had just made the long ride back from the fort.

The red-headed, hot-tempered Wayne obviously had been drinking; Kit couldn't blame him with Oren lying maybe near death.

"Oren's still living," Wayne told her. "The surgeon at the fort gives him an even chance to pull through. Next couple days will tell. He's got the best of care over there. It may be weeks before he's able to talk, though, and when he does he likely won't know who shot him in the back. But we don't need him to tell us; we know a'ready—those ranchers around Apache Ford. I left word in town that if any of those fellows ride up on our range, we're shootin' on sight. It's war for certain between us now—the same kind of war they fought with the Lees."

"But you can't be sure who shot him," argued Kit. "And there's law in this country."

"Who's the law?" asked Wayne contemptuously. "That fat-faced, nervous rabbit of a Sheriff LePlante. He was against us before we ever come into the country. No, we're dependin' on our guns. There'll be no more of our men riding even near Apache Ford until we get ready to go down there to collect pay for Oren and Jubal."

"Wayne," said Kit, "I'd like to speak to you—alone."

Both Wayne and Doc Gossett glanced at her in surprise, Doc Gossett with a narrowing of his eyes.

"Why alone?" asked Wayne. "Doc Gossett is your and Red's and Tommy's guardian. You got nothing to tell me that Doc can't hear, have you?"

"It's all right with me," said Gossett

with a wave of his hand. "I'll rustle myself a little supper meanwhile."

Kit took Wayne into her room where a log still smoldered in the fireplace. Wayne hunkered down near the fire.

"Was anything found on Oren?" asked Kit. "A telegram with a list of names from the adjutant of the Texas ranger force?"

"What?" asked Wayne, astonished. "No, nothing like that on him. He hadn't been robbed, if that's what you mean. What sort of names?"

"Oren was carrying a wire from ranger headquarters in Texas. A wire saying over half of the men who Gossett hired to drive our cattle are outlaws."

"What of it?" returned Wayne. "What do we care if a man's a outlaw or not, as long as he's willin' to stick in the saddle twenty-four hours a day when he has to?"

"But don't you realize it might mean something that so many of the men who came here with us are outlaws? Killers and thieves. Gitch Fleer and Murnam and Tonkin all served time in the penitentiary. Some of the other men were from a gang that raided in Louisiana, stealing horses and killing men. It may be that all of the new hands are the same sort of desperadoes."

"I'd be glad if they were," said Wayne. "We need tough hands—the tougher the better. All of us are going to be outlaws here accordin' to Arizona laws. Those men may be outlaws, but they've acted plumb willing to fight for the outfit. And that's all I ask."

"But can't you see, Wayne?" Kit argued. "It looks as if someone rigged it up for us to bring a gang of trouble-makers over here. I've had a feeling we were being pushed into a war; that it was intended even before we started the drive that there would be a fight between us and those ranchers. Oren left last night with that list of outlaw names, heading for Fort Marvin to ask that troops be sent in. If he never reached the fort, isn't it reasonable to suppose that he was shot by someone who did it to get that list, to keep troops from coming in?"

Wayne shrugged his shoulders. "Oren didn't tell me anything about going to Fort Marvin. Who beside you knew he was going there? Who gave him that list?"

That was the weak point in Kit's argument and she realized it. No one except Dick Challoner had known it, which could point to Challoner as Oren's ambusher—except for the fact that he had given the list to Oren in the first place.

"What difference does it make who gave Oren the list?" she returned. "You refuse to look at this whole matter reasonably; to try to find out what may be behind it. Instead you fly into a rage and throw gun talk. You see only just what it's intended for you to see."

"That's enough for me," declared Wayne. "I'm not going to let my brother be shot down and do nothing about it."

"But what can you do, when you don't know who did the shooting?"

"We'll do plenty. We'll ride down in a couple days and burn a few ranchers' houses at night, and maybe shoot the owners to boot. There's plenty proof against them. You'll have to admit that they dressed up like Apaches and jumped us a few nights ago."

"I don't admit it. We've only the word of Gitch Fleer and Deacon Meadows' brother on that. I wouldn't believe that ornary Gitch on a stack of Bibles."

"You see!" said Wayne. "You're the one that's unreasonable. Keep out of this, Sis. This is something for men to handle. We're makin' those Apache Ford ranchers sorry they ever was born. But who gave Oren that list of names the rangers sent?"

"What does it matter," Kit evaded him, "as long as you are proud to have a bunch of outlaws riding and fighting for you? Only they aren't fighting for us, Wayne—they're really against us."

"Aw, what does a girl know about it?" Wayne scoffed and jingled his spurs back to the kitchen where Doc

Gossett was eating a warmed-over supper.

After the two had left, Kit huddled close to the little fire in her room thinking, and coming finally to a decision. Wayne was determined on a war and there was no stopping him. But he was not running the whole Barlow outfit. He was not running her part of it and he was not going to run that part of it owned by fourteen-year-old Tommy and sixteen-year-old Red. The boys had been sleeping in the house since the arrival of the herds, and Kit went to their room now and wakened them. They sat up in bed, yawning and grumpy, but they were wide awake when they learned she had further news of Oren.

"Tommy and Red," she said, "Wayne just came from Fort Marvin. Oren won't come back for a long time. We've got to look out for ourselves. We've found out that over half the new hands hired to come from Texas with us are outlaws. Gunmen; killers; ex-convicts; cattle thieves wanted by the law in Texas. No one knows who shot Oren; Wayne and Doc Gossett guess it was the ranchers around Apache Ford. But all we know so far is that someone seems to want us in a war against those ranchers. We've got nothing against them nor have they anything against us."

"But they must of shot Oren," said Tommy.

"We don't know who shot Oren," insisted Kit. "And Wayne isn't willing to wait to find out. He's going to start a war that we've got no business going into. Not until we know more. What do you boys think?"

"I say fight," said Tommy promptly. "They shot Oren and Jubal."

"What do you think, Red?" asked Kit.

Red was a smart youngster, wise beyond his sixteen years. "I think you're right, Kit," he said, plainly reluctant to admit that a girl could be right. "I never liked Gitch Fleer and his pals. Tim Cone never did either. Tim says they're a bunch of polecats and he thinks they bushwhacked that deputy sheriff."

Fourteen-year-old Tommy was doubtful. His older brothers, Wayne and Oren, were heroes to him. If Wayne said fight, then Tommy was for fighting. Fighting offered excitement which his boyish soul craved. They'd have to let him carry a six-shooter and he'd make that six-shooter famous in Trouble Basin. He'd carve notches for every man he killed. Already Tommy had a name figured for himself—the Texas Terror.

"I've got an idea," went on Kit. "Supposing we take the hands that worked for us back in Texas—Tim and Asa Harby and Sam Miller and Hod Hunter and Gid Coffee and the others—and move our two herds up the basin close to Hammerhead Mountain. That's on our range and there's an adobe ranch house not far from the Hammerhead where we can live. Up there we'd be far from Apache Ford and from troublemakers like Gitch Fleer. Let's start shoving our two herds up the valley tomorrow. We'll take a wagon load of bedrolls and chuck and be our bosses," she added, knowing boyish likes.

The two looked at Kit curiously, realizing that their sister had suddenly changed. She was no longer a girl to be looked on tolerantly, but a woman, resolute and firm, and reminding them of the mother they had known during their earlier years. Somehow Kit had come to the stature of a person with as much force and determination and sense as a man.

"But how about Doc Gossett?" said Red. "He's guardian of our property. Maybe he won't let us move those cattle."

"He was guardian in Texas," said Kit. "Now we're in Arizona Territory, and the courts here have got to make him guardian all over again. We'll let Tim and Asa Harby and Sam Miller and the rest be our guardians until we get a regular one appointed by a court. Those men are our own people—real

Texans, not the outlaw kind. And," she pointed out again,, "you boys will be your own boss, looking after your own cattle."

The idea of being their own boss and having their cattle under their direct supervision won the argument. Tommy had a sneaking suspicion that if there was a war he'd be kept out of any active fighting anyway.

Next Kit tackled Tim Cone and Marthy, waking the couple.

"Me a guardeen?" exclaimed Tim Cone, scratching his bristly chin. "Kit, you shore think up the dangedest things. But it's a smart idee—movin' the boys outa here with your cattle. Only me, I don't know nothin' about bein' no guardeen. Nor do any of them other cowhands."

"You'll never learn any younger," Kit told him. "First thing in the morning I want you to go down with me to see the rest of the men that worked for us in Texas."

She and Tim rode off at dawn for a quiet talk with each of the Barlow hands, all of them thoroughly dependable, most of them old-timers. To each Kit explained what she planned, telling of the ranger list of outlaws and pledging each to secrecy. To a man they agreed to go with her. It was only sensible to get the younger Barlows out of danger. Angered by the bushwhacking of Jubal Prince, they had joined the Apache Ford fight afterward, but since then they had sobered down, guessing, as Kit had, that they were being shoved into a war and not liking it.

That afternoon without any notice to Wayne or Gossett, the two herds owned by Kit, Tommy and Red were strung out, heading north along the Basin toward the straight-walled mesa called Hammerhead Mountain. Since they were short-handed, Kit, Red, Tommy and the two Mexican freighters, Epigmenio and Pasqual, helped in the drive. The Mexican caretaker at the 44 was driving a single wagon loaded down with chuck, bedrolls and a little furniture. The caretaker's wife, Margarita, went with her husband. A queer sort, Margarita, given sometimes to hours of senseless muttering.

The other hands who had been with the two herds had been told to report for work with Wayne's and Oren's wagons. There was no protest from them. The majority of the crews were already at Wayne's wagon, playing poker and drinking whiskey.

Through these men, Kit knew, word of the move would soon get to Wayne and Gossett. The herds had gone barely three miles before the two came racing up the valley. As the pair headed straight for Kit, Tim Cone, Asa Harby and Gid Coffee hastily spurred over to join the group.

"Where you think you're going?" Wayne bawled at his sister as he reined his horse to a quick stop.

"Taking our cattle and ourselves as far out of trouble as we can," Kit returned calmly. "We're moving to the north end of our range. Going to make that ranch house west of the Hammerhead our home."

Gossett, his big face flushed with anger, spurred his horse close to Kit. "You must be forgetting I'm boss of these cattle," he growled.

"Not in Arizona Territory, you're not," Kit told him defiantly. "You were appointed guardian over our property in Texas, but we're not in Texas. You've got to go to a court here to get new authority to be guardian."

"I can do that easy enough!" shouted Gossett hotly. "And who gave you the right to send away the men I left with these cattle?"

Wayne shrugged his shoulders. "Let 'em go, Doc," he said. "It's a good thing to get the kids out of the way of trouble. We don't need those old-timers. We'll keep the men you hired to do the fighting. If they're all outlaws, they'll be the kind we need."

"Who says they're all outlaws?" demanded Gossett.

"I do," declared Kit. "At least half of the men you hired are wanted in Texas—and maybe all of them. If you

don't believe it, wire ranger headquarters."

Gossett's anger deepened to rage. "You're bringing these cattle back where I put them," he shouted. "I'm boss of these herds. Bring 'em back, you men," he ordered Tim Cone, Asa Harby and Gid Coffee. "Or I'll fire every one of you and let you walk back to Texas."

"Don't listen to him," Kit told them. "We're moving on."

Her pony moved forward but Gossett spurred in to grab a bridle rein.

"I'm saying these cattle go back! I'm boss here, Arizona or no Arizona."

Tim Cone brought his horse alongside Gossett's and slid his carbine barrel over the crook of his arm so it pointed directly at Gossett's middle.

"Take your hands off that bridle rein, Doc," Cone growled. "These two herds belong to Kit and the buttons and we're lookin' after 'em. It's you that's fired, Doc. S'posin' you try walkin' back to Texas."

Gossett looked at Tim's resolute face and at his carbine, and then at Harby and Coffee, who were plainly ready to back Cone's play. "You keep out of this, Tim," he snarled. "By God, I won't stand for any interference. It's my job to protect the younger Barlows, savvy?"

"I'll do my own protecting," Kit put in. "You're holding us up, Doc. Go on back to the war you're so anxious to fight." Unwaveringly her gaze met Doc Gossett's, and it was Gossett finally who surrendered, swinging his horse and, followed by Wayne, riding away.

Steadily the rest of that day and part of the next the columns of cattle moved on toward the queer-shaped mesa. Reaching good grass, they were halted while the wagon went on to the old adobe house, a few miles from the Hammerhead and its precipitous walls.

The house was just a string of rooms, but after the doors had been repaired and broken window-panes covered with boards, it was livable. Kid sighed with relief.

CHAPTER XI

Rustler's Camp

AT FOURTEEN Tommy Barlow considered himself a full-fledged cowboy, about as good a top-hand as had ever come out of Texas, capable of holding his own at tobacco chewing, critter trailing, bronc-riding, outlaw shooting and all such general cowboy accomplishments.

On his first day in the Hammerhead country he had been given the job of riding line below the mountains to the east, keeping strays from the two grazing MB herds shoved back in the Basin. His brother, Red, was helping Tim Cone and the other men cut out cows to locate about a big *cienaga* to the south of the house.

Since the cattle showed no desire to wander into the mountains, Tommy, with nothing to do, took time off to lope back up a nearby canyon, eyeing the slopes covered with pines and oak brush with the interest of a boy raised in plains country.

A mile or so farther on up the canyon, he was aware suddenly of the tracks of a bunch of cattle that had crossed to go up a side canyon. The number, he guessed, must be two or three hundred head. Since there were no cattle in that part of the Basin except the two Barlow herds, Tommy studied the trail critically, deciding that the bunch had passed some time during the previous night.

"Jiggers!" he said aloud, frowning at the tracks. "How'd them critters of ours git off up here? They hadn't ought to stray this far."

In view of his tender years, the natural thing for him to do was to ride to notify Tim Cone. But looking at the tracks now and guessing that they might be some of his own cattle, Tommy saw a chance to show his real mettle. He'd bring back the strays himself.

Following the trail up the side canyon toward a saddle, he suddenly discovered what he had failed to notice before—a number of shod horse tracks among the marks of the cattle hoofs. That meant the herd hadn't just drifted off but had been taken off. Wisdom certainly demanded now that he turn back to notify the Barlow riders. But why, Tommy asked himself. There was a carbine in his saddle scabbard and he carried an ancient six-shooter that was developing a sore place banging against his hip bone.

So armed, why should he who had in secret given himself the awesome title of the Texas Terror be a mere messenger to report news of rustlers? Why not be the lone-handed capturer of the miscreants?

Highly excited by a picture of the Texas Terror bringing into the ranch a bunch of rustlers, at least half of them corpses tied over their saddles, Tommy followed the trail, although using the caution of keeping under cover.

Threading his way through the brush of the saddle, he came to another canyon, along which he rode until around a bend he saw below him in a meadow the cattle, lying down. They were not from the cattle Kit had moved near the Hammerhead but were from Oren's herd, held below the 44 headquarters ranch, which meant they had been driven a considerable distance. From their gaunt looks, they had been shoved along fast. There were no herders in sight. Tommy, looking at them, guessed that the rustlers were resting the herd there for the day. If no cowboys followed them, the cattle would be hustled out of the country that night.

It was simple to go back and report what he had seen, but it was even simpler for the Texas Terror to take in a rustler gang single-handed. Using still warier tactics, Tommy got down to lead his horse, fighting his way through the thick oak brush, circling to get down to the canyon bottom. There among the mountain mahogany scrub along a little creek, the faint smell of wood smoke drifted in. The unerring instinct of the Texas Terror told him that this must be coming from the rustler camp somewhere in the thickets up canyon.

Tommy's heart began to beat fast. He'd slip up on the camp, yell "Put 'em up, you so and suches!" to the men in it, and after shooting three or four to show he meant business, disarm the rest and haze them back to triumph.

Tying his horse and carrying his carbine, the Texas Terror headed in the direction of the smoke smell. When he finally saw the smoke idly sifting through pine branches over the fire, he dropped to his hands and knees to crawl. Snaking through a growth of sapling pines, he came close enough to hear men's voices.

Softly levering a cartridge into firing position, he pushed aside the bushy sapling tops to look at the camp. It was at this moment, with Tommy on his hands and knees, that something pressed into his back—something heavy and large. Tommy pivoted his head on his neck and saw a red-shirted cowboy, a big yellow-faced mulatto, standing directly over him, grinning down with a show of immense teeth. The weight on Tommy's back was one of the mulatto's big, booted feet. As Tommy turned, the foot smashed the boy flat on the ground with his rifle under him.

Tommy realized that he had been seen maybe as soon as he had crossed the saddle, when the mulatto had quietly taken his trail. The Texas Terror had been made to look like a sucker, but the Texas Terror wasn't done. He'd twist to bring out the old six-shooter in his holster—one swift turn of his body—and send a slug up at the mulatto's chest. But as he tried this trick, the mulatto cowboy merely increased the pressure of his foot, squashing Tommy to the ground so hard that he couldn't even breathe.

Then, chuckling, the mulatto took both the boy's rifle and six-shooter and, lifting Tommy to his feet, used the

rifle barrel to poke his small prisoner in toward the fire.

There were seven men lounging in a little space under a big pine, with saddled horses staked out a little distance away. Of the seven men, three were Mexicans; three were just run-of-the-mill hands, including a small, sandy-haired fellow of twenty or so. Another who sat leaning against a tree trunk, with a cigarette dangling from a mouth corner, was different. He had a thin face and black eyes in which burned a restless energy. He looked at Tommy so savagely that Tommy shivered. That dark hombre was a mighty mean individual.

"What you want, Bub?" this man asked, barely moving his thin lips as Tommy was halted close to the fire.

"You needn't try to fool me," said Tommy, deciding to put on a bold front. "I caught you fellers red-handed with a bunch of our cattle."

No one laughed at the boy's bravado. They just looked at Tommy speculatively.

"And now you caught us, younker," the young sandy-haired fellow asked gravely, "what you going to do with us?"

"Going to take you in," declared Tommy. "I seen by your horse tracks you drove off them cattle, and don't try to lie out of it."

Still none of them so much as cracked a smile. "We wouldn't try to lie out of it, Bub," remarked a scar-faced oldster. "Here's the truth of it: Them cows of your jist picked up and follered after us up outa the Basin. We done our best to slip away and leave 'em behind, but what did they do? They jist up and galloped after us. And when we tried to drive 'em back, they wouldn't even go. I guess they jist like us."

Tommy had been around cow camps too much not to know when he was being ribbed by a bunch of would-be humorists. But the black-eyed man wasn't in the mood for ribbing.

"He come up here alone?" he asked the mulatto.

"Yaas, boss, all by hisself," said the mulatto. "He done tied his hawss back a way and crep' up erfoot."

"Who are you anyway?" asked the black-eyed man in a voice that held some of the deadliness of a rattler's whir. "You work for the Barlows?"

"Me, I'm a Barlow," said Tommy. "I own part of two herds of cattle. The cattle you got here belong to my brother, Oren."

All of the men looked at him at this, the dark man with a narrowing of his eyes. "A Barlow, are you?" he said. "And I guess your family thinks a lot of you."

After that the man sat, apparently thinking it over. The others, including the mulatto cowboy, dropped their interest in Tommy.

One of the saddled horses stood grazing not far away, reins dragging on the ground. Slyly Tommy began to edge toward the animal. This camp was no place for the Texas Terror. The thing to do was to retreat and come back later to wipe out these desperadoes.

But here again he was foiled. He started a sudden dash for the horse, but just as he snatched up the reins and put a hand on the saddle horn, a loop of rope sailed out to settle about his shoulders. It had been thrown by the big mulatto, who yanked Tommy to the ground and proceeded to hogtie him as he would a calf, using thong leather to bind Tommy's ankles and wrists together. Tommy fought like a cougar cub, and after he was tied cursed them all. The mulatto bent to slap the boy's face with his big ham-like hand. Tommy tried to bite the hand. Angered by this, the mulatto smashed Tommy's lips against his teeth so hard that blood came.

The rest laughed at this, all except the thin-faced man whom the rest called Blackie. "We'll take the button with us," he declared. "If we run into trouble with the Barlows, the kid'll be our ace in the hole. And after we git him slipped into that hide-out canyon

where we hold cattle, we'll ask the Barlows for a bunch of cash. How does that sound, Doble?" he asked the youngish fellow.

"Why, the ornary little devil," said the sandy-haired youth, "no one would give a cent to have him back! They oughta be glad he's gone."

"The ornarier these kids are, the more their folks think of 'em," stated Blackie. "We'll ask the Barlows twenty thousand dollars for him. And send along one of the kid's ears to show 'em we mean business."

Toward evening two riders came into camp, one so close a replica of the sandy-haired youth, Doble, as to be his brother. At the second, a rangy, blond-haired rider, Tommy stared startled, then with sudden hatred which smoldered in his eyes.

"Howdy, Blackie," this rider said. "I'm reportin' for work. Ran into Jake Doble here and he told me where I'd find you."

"You damn cow thief!" yelled Tommy, outraged at the idea that a former Barlow trail driver should be in the gang.

Dick Challoner turned to see the boy lying bound on the ground. Startled, he took a step toward Tommy and then halted.

"What you got here, Blackie?"

"You ought to know, bein' you once worked for the Barlows," said Blackie. "He said he was one of the family. Is that right?"

"That's right," admitted Challoner regretfully. The kid had made a mistake in telling this gang who he was. He walked over to Tommy and grinned down at him while the boy heatedly cursed.

"He's shore a wildcat," said the Doble brother who had been in camp. "He was figuring to take us all in for rustlers."

Challoner laughed, but as Tommy swore at him again, Challoner scowled suddenly. "Shut up, you little varmint," he ordered, "or I'll give you a kick in the ribs." His boot actually went against the boy's side, but the toe slipped under the boy's body so that only the instep contacted. Tommy, not appreciating the gentleness of the kick, cursed Challoner again with great sincerity.

Challoner shrugged his shoulders and moved over to the fire. "Seems you boys got busy already," he remarked. "Driving off cattle?"

"Yeah," admitted Blackie. "We drove these off from a herd near the 44, but we could of saved ourselfs the trouble. Yesterday they moved two herds up near the ranch t'other side of the Hammerhead. There's only a few riders lookin' after 'em and it'll be a cinch to slip cows outa here a hundred at a time. And more'n that, this kid is worth a pot of money. We'll hold him for ransom—say twenty thousand dollars."

"Kidnaping," drawled Challoner, "is sort of serious business. Looked at as worse than cow-stealing around these parts."

"Nothin's too serious for me," said Blackie confidently. "That's mighty easy money. I've been wonderin', fella, if you'd be worth your grub to us, but this kidnapin' is where you fit in. I figger you can be the go-between in collectin' ransom for this kid. You know the Barlows personally and they know you."

"Yeah," admitted Challoner reluctantly, pretending not to like the assignment, "but me actin' as go-between means I'll be a marked man the rest of my life. With a rope waitin' for me when I'm caught."

"That'll be your tough luck," snarled Blackie. "I'm boss here; you'll do what I say. And let me warn you of one thing —don't try to—"

"Sure, I know," interrupted Challoner, "don't try to doublecross you. You told me that a'ready and I told you I'm the soul of honor."

Blackie stared hard at the big blond addition to his gang. A tough bird, but to be in Blackie's gang you had to be tough.

CHAPTER XII

Hammerhead Mountain

RANGER Dick Challoner shrugged his shoulders and went to help himself from the skillets on the coals. Inside he was jubilant. Blackie had done better than merely accept him as member of the band. Acting as go-between, he could get Tommy away. But he wasn't waiting there long. Kit would be worried sick about Tommy's disappearance. Blackie was going to move the cattle out that night, and during the ride he would manage to sneak the boy away. He strolled near the boy as darkness fell.

"Don't worry," Challoner ordered in a low tone. "I'll get you out of this. I don't belong to this gang; I'm a Texas ranger. Howcome part of you to move up in this Hammerhead country?"

"Oren got shot," muttered Tommy, surprised by the revelation but cheering up immediately. "And Sis took the bit in her teeth and left Wayne and Doc Gossett."

"Oren shot?" repeated Challoner. Something must have gone wrong during Oren's ride to the fort to ask for troops.

The rustlers were getting ready to leave the camp, taking a horse with bedrolls. Challoner figured that he could get himself put in charge of the boy. After that it would be easy. There were about a dozen men in Blackie Jackson's present gang. Half a dozen of them went out to bunch the cattle, and another rider who had not been at the camp since Challoner had arrived rode in and dismounted to head for the Dutch ovens and skillets. As the man ate he caught sight of Challoner and after that the ranger noticed that he moved back abruptly out of the firelight. Challoner had an uneasy feeling that the rider had identified him as a ranger. He always ran that risk. Texas was a big state, but its people were still comparatively few in number and outlaws covered wide stretches of territory. Yet the man ate calmly, although afterward he drifted over to Blackie Jackson.

Challoner's hunch that trouble was brewing grew stronger. Tommy, still tied, had been left lying some yards from the fire. The fire had been allowed to die out but it and the starlight illuminated the camp. Pretending to go back to take care of his horse, he stole up through the brush stealthily to cut Tommy's bonds with three quick slashes of a knife, whispering to the boy to lie where he was.

When he came back into camp he could tell that Blackie's attitude toward him had changed. If Challoner hoped to get Tommy away without trouble, he figured that his only chance was to tell Blackie that he had been a ranger.

Rolling a cigarette, he stood leaning back comfortably against a tree trunk not far from Blackie. "If anyone ever tells you he saw me in Texas wearing a ranger's badge, Blackie, don't be worried," he drawled. "I joined up with 'em for a while. Everybody makes mistakes. I made one in thinkin' ranger pay was enough for the work and risk of the job."

Blackie said nothing, but behind him Challoner heard a stealthy rustle and realized that somebody was coming up on him, probably to cover him with a gun. When he heard the faint crackle of a twig behind the tree, he was sure of it. There were only three men in camp beside Blackie. The odds were large against the ranger, but he knew suddenly he had to take them.

He whirled suddenly and, stepping to the left of the tree, sent a hard kick at the middle of the man behind it. A loud yell showed he had landed in some painful spot and the man went staggering back.

Instantly Challoner leaped toward Blackie, reaching the rustler's side in one great step. Before the rustler leader could dodge away or draw a gun,

Challoner slapped the barrel of his own six-shooter against the man's head. Then as Blackie slumped, Challoner caught him under the arms and lifted the man to hold him against his own chest as a shield. Tommy had run to his side, to take Blackie's pistol from its holster, using it to help cover the other men. The big mulatto who had been packing a horse on the other side of the fire was scurrying to get behind the animal. Challoner fired over Blackie's shoulder. The mulatto coughed, took a stumbling backward step and went to the ground.

"Any of you fire a shot and I'll put a slug through your boss!" called Challoner and with Tommy he moved back toward the saddled horses at the edge of the camp.

The rustler leader, stunned by the gun slap alongside his head, didn't resist. Men hearing the shot were galloping toward camp, but meanwhile Challoner had heaved Blackie up into the saddle of his own horse. Tommy had climbed like a squirrel into the saddle of another.

"Head out," Challoner ordered Tommy, and the boy kicked his mount into the brush. Challoner followed, trotting alongside the horse Blackie rode, holding Blackie in the saddle. He intended to let the rustler drop when he had got clear, but pursuit was going to be too close and the light was good enough for fairly accurate shooting. Which made Blackie too valuable a hostage to leave behind. The rustler was recovering enough to grunt as Challoner swung up behind the saddle, and Challoner tapped the pistol barrel against the man's skull again to quiet him. Blackie's feet were in the stirrups and the man was riding automatically, with Challoner guiding the horse.

Tommy asked to send back a few shots, but Challoner did not want to start shooting until necessary. Starting a battle might make the rustlers forget that they were endangering their leader by shooting. The side of the canyon they were racing over was covered with thick brush that all but tore them from their saddles. Then the open canyon bottom was ahead and, directed by Challoner, Tommy led the way down it. The men behind had dropped back temporarily, maybe to talk over some plan of making a safe rescue of Blackie.

As the fugitives and their captive fled down the canyon bottom, Challoner's mount fell behind under the double burden. Wisdom demanded that he drop the rustler, but Challoner had a stubborn streak. He spurred his horse the harder to keep at the tail of Tommy's mount.

"Let me take that Blackie bird," said Tommy, reining in to let Challoner come alongside. "You two are too heavy."

"No," said Challoner. "If something happens to me or to my horse, I want you free to ride like hell for the ranch."

Pursuit was thundering after them again, but the men were still reluctant to shoot, fearing to hit their leader and waiting until they got close enough to drop the horses. The canyon mouth was ahead of the fugitives. Out in the open Basin they would soon be run down. Challoner turned aside into a tangle of brush growing below a canyon slope and halted, hoping that the men would go by. The horsemen spurred nearer and then on past in a blind race, while Challoner kept a gun to Blackie's side to prevent the man from yelling out.

"We'll cut you into little pieces for this, ranger," growled Blackie who had recovered. "We'll do a better job of makin' a man die hard than the Apaches ever done."

When the men were a hundred yards away and still traveling, Challoner led the way up to the top of the ridge. The pursuers, failing to see their quarry out in the Basin, were turning back to trail them, lighting matches to see where the horses had turned off. He stopped to cut off two rawhide saddle strings, tying Blackie's hands to the horn with them. After that Blackie would have to ride; if he jumped off he

would be dragged. It would leave Challoner free if necessary to fight a rear guard attack with a six-shooter.

A prong of the ridge stretched far out into the Basin, ending not over a mile or so from Hammerhead Mountain. Along the comb of this they hurried, keeping to it as long as possible to postpone appearing in the valley. Close to the end of the ridge lay a creek, lined with willows and curving toward the base of Hammerhead Mountain. They took to the creek, riding down it between the brush screens.

Behind them some of the riders, having found the trail, were scattering, racing wildly about trying to find the fugitives, scouting the little creeks that flowed from the canyon mouths. One of these men heard the splash of hoofs and shot twice to summon his companions.

Horses were pounding closer as Challoner and Tommy continued to race along the creek behind the cloaking wall of brush. The rustlers were shooting now, but low, hoping to cripple a horse's leg. Challoner fell back to trade a few slugs with them while Blackie Jackson, with his hands tied to the saddle horn, cursed helplessly.

Riders were pounding down to cut in ahead of the fugitives, preventing them from swinging around the south end of the Hammerhead, beyond which lay the Barlow camp. Others came on them from the side, in effect pinning them against the base of the mesa with its precipitous cliffs.

As the creek swung in against the mesa wall, Tommy called that his horse had been hit by a bullet and was going down. Challoner came in alongside and, cutting Blackie loose, yanked the rustler to the ground.

"Take my horse and make a run for it, Tommy," he ordered. "I'll stay with Blackie."

"No," said Tommy. "Me, I'm stayin' with you, ranger."

Tommy's chances, admitted Challoner, were about as good or rather as bad in staying with him. Challoner slapped the rump of the remaining horse, sending it downstream and, kicking Blackie to get him moving, hustled the prisoner along the creek, hunting for some break in the walls offering a place to hole up. Blackie tried to slow them by stumbling and Challoner kicked him again.

"I'll kill you inch by inch, ranger," raged Blackie. "Apaches don't know nothin' about how to make a man die."

"Shut up, you!" ordered Challoner. "If they get me, it'll be only after I've put a bullet in you."

The rustlers were hemming them in as they reached a field of fallen boulders under a great, flatiron-shaped wedge of cliff stood on end. Cornered here, they could hold out only as long as their cartridges lasted. Which wouldn't be long once they were located.

Some of Blackie Jackson's gang had dismounted and were coming in afoot, sniffing through the brush and fallen fragments of cliff. In the dim light Challoner desperately scanned the walls for a place to fort up, moving meanwhile along the creek, pushing Blackie Jackson ahead of him. Coming to a thicket, they pushed their way through it to enter a little open space where the creek had overflowed to make a wide pebbly beach. Before them was a great table-topped boulder the size of a cabin. Challoner figured that on top of this, with a few fragments of stone for barricade and the cliff wall behind them, they could make a stand.

Sure that the fugitives were close, the rustlers were advancing gingerly for fear of stumbling into lead. Some of them were yelling for Blackie to answer them, but Blackie was silent. He had nothing to gain by risking a shot from Challoner. It was only a matter of time Blackie figured until his men rescued him—and then he'd have the ranger where he wanted him.

Boy-like, Tommy, as Challoner looked for a way to climb the big boulder, began a little scouting on his own, along the base of the great flat-

iron-shaped wedge of cliff that stood under the main wall. Mountains and all their phases were new to Tommy. He returned suddenly to Challoner's side. "Hey, ranger," he whispered, "I found something that looks just like a big staircase. We could climb it easy."

"What are you talking about?" asked Challoner. "A staircase?"

"Sure is," said Tommy. "It slants up fifty feet, maybe a hundred, and we could climb it."

Such a slanting chute might be even better for defense than the boulder top and, pushing Blackie ahead of him, Challoner followed Tommy, who squeezed through a slit between the boulder and the foot of the flatiron-shaped cliff. Through it, Challoner was aware that they were in a crevice between the main wall and the outer fragment of cliff, a great crack that was perhaps thirty feet wide at the base. A space had been left when the wedge of cliff had split off the mesa, and this space extended into the air perhaps more than a hundred feet, as well as Challoner could tell in the dim light.

On any hour of a night lighted as this one was only by stars and a segment of moon, the crevice would be almost as dark as a cave. Now by a coincidence which had made possible the boy's discovery, the moon was shining straight into the crack, illuminating it well enough to show that up this split lay a steeply sloping rocky incline somewhat resembling, as Tommy had declared, a staircase.

As curious as Tommy, Challoner sent Blackie stumbling upward along the chute. Underfoot the rock was smooth; plainly the incline was the course of a stream in time of rain. It became increasingly steeper as they climbed; but, using one wall as a support, they were able to get up it.

Blackie slyly tried to kick loose and send stones rolling down to notify the searching men where the fugitives had gone, until Challoner made the rustler take off his boots and walk in his sock feet.

Challoner expected when they reached the top of the chute that they would be at the end of the nature-made trail. That suited him. Blackie's gang couldn't climb that incline against the shots he could send down. But at the top of the thin wedge which stood apart from the main mass of the mesa, they found something even more curious than the incline itself. They came on it suddenly, and it was so realistic that Tommy stopped with a scared yelp. A lion. Not a live one, of course, but a stone one. And not an African lion but the American variety, the so-called mountain lion, cougar or panther, sitting up on its haunches like a cat, looking out on the Basin.

CHAPTER XIII

Prisoners on the Hammerhead

ONE of nature's freaks, thought Challoner, looking at the figure, and then changed his mind. Human hands had made use of a boulder with somewhat the form of a sitting big cat and had carved on it a head, forelegs and shoulders. It was crude but undoubtedly human work.

Furthermore he could see angling up along the face of the main cliff towering several hundred feet above them a narrow trough, the same water course up which they had come. Challoner made a guess. The same human beings who had done the rude piece of statuary also had used the water course as a passageway to the top of the unclimbable mesa. The same notion came to Tommy.

"Gosh," said the boy. "There might be a whole tribe of Indians on top."

Challoner doubted that. There was no evidence that human feet had passed here very recently; grass grew in crevices of the rocky bed.

"What'll we find up there then?" asked Tommy. He took it for granted that they should continue their exploration. He had all but forgotten the rustlers.

"If we can really get up, we'll see," said Challoner. "People claim this mesa has never been climbed, but likely on top we'll find a log shack and some old pioneer snoozing on the porch with half a dozen hound dogs around his feet. It's just possible Apaches might be using this place as hide-out—some of the raiders that have been troubling Colonel Macklin. You better wait here while I go up to see."

"Not me," said Tommy. "I found this place; I'm goin' with you."

"Bueno," said Challoner, grinning. "You too, Blackie."

Blackie swore but he had no choice. They had to clamber on hands and knees over short stretches of the steep chute, but they climbed steadily, stopping only to get their wind. Below the rim which seemed to overhang the walls, the last step of the water course fell straight through a big crack. They managed to skirt around this, hauling themselves up by the brush to find themselves on the mesa top, with the Basin far below them.

Silently they looked about them in the moonlight. Tommy was disappointed. He had expected a castle or at least one of those five-story pueblo apartments built by Indians on the Rio Grande. But there was nothing like that—simply a rolling mesa top, covered by grass, with occasional cedars and scrub pines. An owl flew overhead, hooting its disgust at having its privacy disturbed.

"Bet we're the first white men up here anyway," said Tommy. "I'm goin' to carve our names on a rock up here first chance I get."

A little distance away were some low grass-grown mounds. Challoner guessed them to be the remains of dwelling places or rooms for worship used by

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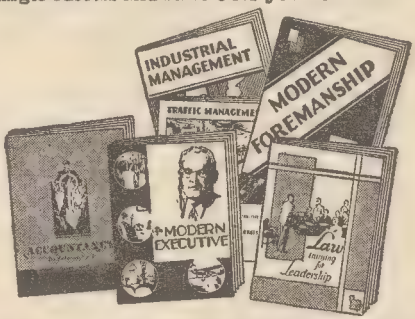

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aborigines in times long past. Bearing this out, underfoot with a little search they discovered some bits of broken pottery. They tramped clear around the rim of the little island in the air and then criss-crossed back over it, but found nothing else.

Challoner was not worried about the rustlers following them; it was a chance in a million that Tommy had stumbled on the trail during the few moments that the moon was shining down into the crevice. They returned finally, Challoner rolling a smoke for Blackie, whose hands were still tied, and making one for himself. They had spent more time in climbing and exploring the mesa than he had thought; already the sky was graying in the east.

When the light grew a little stronger they had another look around. There were no tracks of animals except rabbits, and in the distance they could hear the gobbling of turkeys. Pinyon jays quarreled in the tree branches.

Tommy scurried around, still hoping for Indian ruins, but Challoner was not interested in ruins just then. An idea struck him when he saw not far from the water course stairway a little cave-like room made by a flat boulder which had fallen across some rounded boulders, leaving a rude shelter of a room six feet high and perhaps twelve square.

"I hate to do it, Blackie," he remarked, "but Tommy and I got to travel, and you handicap us. How does this look to you as a jail?"

"I'll cut your heart out, you double-crosser," raged Blackie Jackson. "I'll boil you in a iron kettle like you'd render down lard."

"Come, Blackie," said Challoner good-humoredly, "be reasonable. All I intend to do with you is take you back to Texas to stand trial for all the ornariness you've done."

"You'll never get me back to Texas," said Blackie.

Challoner slipped out Blackie's belt

and, taking his knife, ran a blade down the middle of the leather to make two strong, pliable strips of leather.

"Going to tie you up and leave you up here," he went on. "It's a sort of gamble; if you can work loose before I get back, you'll be free."

Blackie protested strenuously. If Challoner failed to get back he would starve to death, he pointed out. Challoner admitted this regretfully.

"But you can be sure I'll be back," the ranger assured his prisoner. "Texas wants to see you too bad for me not to come for you."

The ranger guessed that no matter how he tied Blackie, the rustler could work loose eventually. But Challoner expected to return within a few hours at most. He took off Blackie's boots, which had been replaced on reaching the mesa top, and used the leather strings to tie the rustler's ankles securely to two small trees a couple of feet apart. After that he lashed Blackie's wrists behind his back. It was not a comfortable position for Blackie, lying on his back with his legs spread apart, but then rustlers must expect a few inconveniences.

Dawn was coming over the Basin. Looking from the rim, they saw the rustlers loping back toward the canyon mouth, evidently giving up the hunt.

Leaving Blackie heaping curses on Texas rangers, Challoner and Tommy descended the passageway rapidly and, keeping to the brush of the creek, went along it for two miles. Then striking an arroyo leading west toward the headquarters of the two herds Kit had moved, they hurried along it until they saw a party of horsemen riding toward them.

Hastily the two ducked out of sight. When Tommy recognized Tim Cone in the lead, he insisted on staying hidden. The half-dozen horsemen, who were due to pass within a few feet of the two, had been out hunting Tommy the night before and, after returning to the

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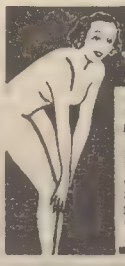

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PHILIP'S NECKWEAR, 20 West 22nd St., Dept. M-44, New York

ranch, were just starting out again. They had brought an extra horse on which to bring back Tommy in case he were found lying out somewhere hurt.

"That kid was shore a real man," the two listeners heard Tim Cone say sadly as he jogged up. "I'd give both my arms to git him back. Yessir, a nervy kid, that Tommy."

Tommy winked at Challoner and then stepped out into sight. Challoner followed.

"Why there you are, you little hellion!" growled Tim Cone. "Somebuddy ort to larrup the hide off'n your wu'thless back. Don't you know your sister and us been worried sick with you stayin' out all night? Where you been anyway?"

"Huntin' rustlers," said Tommy. "They stole a big bunch of cattle outa Oren's herd."

"Rustlers?" said Tim Cone. "Lead us to 'em."

"Lend me that extra horse and I'll do that," offered Challoner.

Tim Cone looked at Challoner suspiciously. "You ain't explained yit how come you to show up with Tommy."

"He's all right," said Tommy quickly. "He's a Texas ranger. Blackie Jackson's gang of rustlers overpowered me and was goin' to hold me for twenty thousand dollars ransom. This here ranger cut me loose and got me away from the bunch, takin' Blackie Jackson with him. They had us cornered, but Challoner and me got away by climbin' Hammerhead Mountain."

"Lead on then," said Tim Cone. "All that sounds like plenty recommend. You two must of been purt' busy to of done all them things in one night."

One man on the poorest horse was sent back to notify Kit that Tommy had been found. The rest, led by Challoner and with Tommy doubling up with the smaller Straw brother, rode back up the creek, keeping to the brush screen until they reached the mountains. Making a big circle to come in on the rustler

camp, they found that the cattle were gone. Evidently giving up Blackie, the rustler gang had hustled out with the stolen herd, heading across the range.

They set off in pursuit, Challoner riding ahead as scout. Within two hours he discovered the herd, with the rustlers shoving them along fast down a deep, wide canyon. Hastily he dropped back to scatter out the Barlow riders along the brushy ridges above the herd.

Challoner had hopes of corralling at least half of Blackie's gang, but a round stone started by one of the Barlow horses high up on the ridge rolled noisily down a slope to give an alarm to the rustlers. They were already nervous, realizing that they might be followed, and one of the Doble brothers, catching sight of a horseman in the brush, gave a warning yell to the rest and spurred into cover to begin a wild flight. The others followed suit.

The Barlow riders opened a hot fire that sent echoes battering at the canyon walls, but the rustlers fled like scared rabbits through the brush, and targets were elusive. The gang made no attempt to fight back; they were in too much of a hurry to make a getaway.

One rustler's horse was dropped and, as he fell with his mount, the rider was landed upon by Tim Cone's two hundred pounds, which was about the same as having a house fall on him. Another was pinned under his fallen horse and surrendered. A third, one of the two young Doble brothers, Jake, was cornered and gave up rather than be shot out of his saddle. The others escaped over the ridge, dropping into a tangle of rocks and brush where it was impossible to follow them. Besides recovering the herd, they captured the gang's pack horses laden with grub and bedrolls.

"I see jist the tree limb we need," remarked Tim Cone significantly as he gazed at the prisoners.

"None of that," said Challoner. "This outfit is all wanted in Texas. It's Blackie Jackson's bunch. Tommy found us a safe place to put 'em in storage—up on top the Hammerhead. One of you men can act as guard."

Tim grumblingly gave up his projected lynching, and they started the herd and captives back for the Basin. Reaching it while the others took care of the cattle, Challoner sent Tommy on home and, with the oldish but spry little Gid Coffee who had volunteered to act as jailer, hazed the three prisoners to the foot of the mountain. Leaving their horses, they climbed to the top, herding the prisoners ahead of them carrying with them a little grub and a few cooking pots.

"This is a tough bunch to guard," Challoner told Gid Coffee. "Better keep 'em tied up. These boys are plumb dangerous."

"I know that," said Coffee. "I heard of Blackie Jackson back in Texas. They don't come no more dangerouser than him."

Blackie Jackson, who made a humorous picture with his ankles tied wide apart, greeted his companions with curses for their dumbness in having been captured. Challoner and Gid Coffee tied all the men in pairs, back to back.

"How about some blankets?" asked the prisoner, Jake Doble. "It gits cold up here at night."

"You won't need blankets," Challoner told him. "Your guard will keep a fire going after dark to watch you fellows by. I'll bring up another man before night," he informed Coffee. "So one of you can sleep while the other guards."

Then Challoner turned to head for the Barlow ranch near the Hammerhead. There was the matter of the shooting of Oren Barlow that he wanted to look into. And for another, he hadn't seen Kit Barlow for something like four days. Which was a mighty long time, Challoner had discovered, to go without seeing that particular girl. Something had to be done about it.

(To be continued in the next issue)

OUT OF THE

with Tex

Editor's Note: *Tex Sherman, who gives you rodeo news hot off the griddle, is personally acquainted with performers and producers from coast to coast. Have you any question you'd like answered about any particular rodeo or contestant? Write Tex Sherman in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York. Be sure to enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and Mr. Sherman will send you a prompt reply.*

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

GLADWATER, Texas, got a nice break as to weather this year, and over 15,000 people took advantage of it to see one of the fastest rodeos ever to be staged in the Southwest. The rodeo opened with memorial services for the late Earl Hendrix, former director of the rodeo, who died last January. While taps sounded, his favorite saddle horse was led around the arena with stirrups tied up. Earl had been very popular with everyone, and thoughts of him gave the opening performance a serious note.

According to the reports we have received, a world's record was broken at Gladwater. Dee Burke roped and tied his calf in 6 1/5 seconds. For many years John Bowman held the calf-roping record of 11 seconds flat.

Bob Elliott was the only unlucky waddy to suffer serious injury. He was chased into the chutes by a Brahma bull and unfortunately got some bad lacerations on his face. Jim Calder was stomped on by a bull that threw him, but he remained in the contest.

Morris, Minn., found that the cure for rodeo fever is rodeo. They've just seen the show at Fort Snelling draw the largest crowds ever in that city. One of the top-hands who got into the day money was Ken Williams.

Pierre, S. D., has also been enjoying a rodeo, its third annual Days of '81. This is the home town of Kenneth Cooper, champion

CHUTES

Sherman

bronc-rider of twenty years ago. This show drew a swell line-up of top-hands, among them the famous Ross brothers.

Bruce Ross led his brothers Gene and Herschel, winning three hundred dollars more than either of them. Bruce sure went to town, winning the hundred-dollar saddle offered to the cowboy getting the high-point average in all events. He made 9.5 seconds in bulldogging and roped and tied his calf in 22.4. When you consider how wild and tough those calves were, that time is pretty good.

This rodeo was staged by the Pierre Betterment Ass'n under the auspices of the local Chamber of Commerce. Norval Cooper, Sheriff Bill Powell and Mac Dickey were the judges. No accidents to report, for which thanks!

Frank Moore is busy with plans for the annual Garden rodeos to be held in New York and Boston. All events in these two rodeos will be contests with the exception of the trick riding and roping, which will be contracted for.

The New Mexico State Fair will do away with the run of vaudeville acts it usually puts on in front of the grandstands, and will stage a rodeo instead. Lynn Beutler has been engaged to furnish the bucking stock and direct the arena.

Gene Autry, who is now in the rodeo game for keeps, has purchased a big ranch near Ardmore, Okla., where he will have his rodeo headquarters. He is now on a spending spree, taking along Mike Hastings to buy the best and toughest broncs he can find.

Autry dropped in to see our old friend, Col. W. T. Johnson of San Antonio, Texas, and got some good advice on how to run a rodeo. He says he'll spend as much as seventy-five thousand dollars, to put on one of the largest and best rodeos the country has ever seen.

I was shocked to hear of the sudden death of Jack Hughes, a former cowboy and well known dentist who staged many rodeos in Florida in years past. The last time I saw Jack, he visited me in my hotel in Birmingham, Ala., when I was there in connection with a rodeo. He is survived by his wife, Ollie, a well known trick rider, and by a sister. Like Tom Mix, he was killed in an auto accident which resulted from a tire blowing out while he was going at a fast pace. It happened near Emery Junction, Mich., on June 27th.

There was a sad and peculiar accident at the rodeo held at the Gregg Farms in Indianapolis, Ind. A bucking horse broke its leg while bucking toward the catch pen, no one knows just how. Bill Hammonds had the unpleasant but necessary job of shooting the animal, and it had to be done in front of thousands of people in order to put it quickly out of its misery.

Chip Morris and his famous educated horse, "Black Fox," was the talk of the Indianapolis show. Also a favorite was Lucyle Richards, whom you've read about in this column. She's the only girl to be both an aviator and a champion cowgirl bronc-rider. Lucyle now plans to ferry bombers to England when she receives permission from Washington.

Mustn't forget to tell you that RANCH ROMANCES gave two handsomely framed oil paintings of Western scenes to the best all-round cowboy and cowgirl at the Ski-Hi Stampede at Monte Vista, Colo. Haven't got the names of the winners at hand, but will pass them along to you soon.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

amateur page

Editor's Note—*This page is made up from contributions of readers. On it we shall publish original pieces of cartoons or verse or prose. The only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs, and that the contributions be such as will appeal to people interested in the West and in Western stories. For each contribution published we will send the writer (or artist, if it is a cartoon) two dollars. Each person may submit more than one contribution.*

Address all contributions to RANCH ROMANCES' Amateur Page, 515 Madison Avenue, New York City. All submissions will be considered. **NO SUBMISSIONS WILL BE RETURNED,** *nor can we enter into correspondence about your contributions. Remember—and this is important—all material must be original with the person submitting it, and not copied from anything else.*

God Loved the West

GOD must have been a cowboy
And lived out in the West.
He must have kinda liked the place,
For He fixed it up the best.

He made the plains and mountains,
Then planted sage and chaparral,
And to Himself He said "It's good,"
As He looked upon it all.

"Now just what kind of people
Will I put out here?" He said.
Then the noblest ones that He could find
By Him were westward led.

Of course He made the going rough,
That fact we can't deny,
And only the very few got through
Who said, "We'll do or die."

Yes, the pioneers were good and true.
They helped each other live,
And to a fallen fellow man
Their everything they'd give.

So when this job He finished,
He said, "I think I'll rest,"
Then smiled as He looked on it all—
I know God loved the West.

Sherman F. Boone, Malden, Mo.

Cowboy Life in the Army

I'M a cowboy in the Army
And servin' a year of time,
And I'm tellin' you I'm larnin'
To march and drill just fine.

But I was scar't as a locoed steer
When I left my stompin' ground,
For fear I'd peel pertaters
With a apron hangin' 'round.

Shucks, 'tis just sorta play
To what our boss called work,
And I ain't got nothin' much to say
'Cept I shore miss my boots and quirt.

My boots is stored some place clos't
And my ten-gallon Stetson, too
They give me some dudish flat-heeled boots
And a cap that's as thin as dew.

They sent my hoss back to roam
And give me a truck to buck,
Give me a slicked-up uniform
And a little old tent for my bunk.

Outside of that, I ain't got no pains
And I guess I'm lucky as Ned;
But, pard, could you lope out to the plains
And have a look at my spread?

Odetta Anderson, Kress, Texas

King of the Plains

SO THIS is what the world looked like! A gangling, long-legged colt following by his mother's side looked over the surroundings from the top of a high hill. On this hill was a herd of beautiful wild horses, grazing contentedly in the early morning sunshine.

The herd had spent the winter in a sheltered valley and now, in spring, had moved higher up to new feeding grounds, and the horses were filling their gaunt bellies with tender green grass.

As the other horses grazed, the young colt looked around. The trees were just bursting into bud and a few early spring flowers were trying hard to show their faces on the hillside. A river roared and tumbled, smashing pieces of ice not yet melted.

That year passed quickly to the palomino colt, who grew more beautiful each day. He changed into a tall, sturdy yearling whose coat glistened, and his mane and tail were like wind-whipped silk. He could outrun all the yearlings in the herd and others they met as they moved from place to place.

The next year the beautiful two-year-old stallion became leader of the herd. Once or twice that year, horse hunters tried to catch some of the horses. But the palomino could drive the herd before him. No other horse in the country could catch him. He became the talk of the land, and someone named him Nero.

One day in midsummer, as Nero stood on the crest of a hill watching while the herd grazed below, two horse hunters stood on top of another hill admiring the beautiful picture he made. Motionless, with head held high, mane and tail blowing slightly in the breeze and creamy coat glistening, he stood on guard.

"I'd certainly love to catch him," one of the two said to his companion.

The other smiled as he answered, "To catch him would be one thing, but to train him would be another. I don't think a man on earth could ride him."

As they watched, Nero seemed to catch their scent. With a shrill whistle to his herd, he drove the horses ahead of him. Suddenly he stopped, as if coaxing the men to chase him. Then the great palomino raced away to join the herd unconquered—a king of the plains.

Beulah Fisher, Aged 12,
St. Albert, Alta., Canada

The Ballad of Medicine Bow

ONE day in the morning
A long time ago,
As I hazed my pinto
Towards Medicine Bow,
I met with a stranger
Just easing along,
And as he approached me
He yodeled this song:

"Ki-yi and Ki-yippee,
Ki-you and Ki-yo!
I've got me a sweetheart
In Medicine Bow.
Her eyes are like turquoise,
Her teeth are like pearl;
She's a regular jewel—
A gem of a girl."

I said to the stranger,
"My girl lives there, too.
She has some nice molars,
And her eyes they are blue.
So let us not tarry,
The way is so long."
He spurred to a gallop
And sang me this song:

"Ki-yi and Ki-yippee,
Ki-you and Ki-yo!
I'll set you the pace, sir,
To Medicine Bow.
I'll show you my heels, sir,
As slick as a pin.
So lay on the leather
If you want to win."

He tore down the road
At a furious rate.
I knew in a moment
I'd started too late.
And when I rode wearily
Into the town,
That stranger was singing
To *my* Nellie Brown:

"Ki-yi and Ki-yippee,
Ki-you and Ki-yo!
I'm first in the running
At Medicine Bow.
I gave her a di'mond—
A bargain we made;
A gem for a jewel
Is fair enough trade!"

Marjorie Hunt Pettit, Roseburg, Ore.

My Wyoming Sweetheart

FRESH as the air from the mountains,
Pure as the clean-blowing sand,
Born of the strength of the prairie
In the heart of the Western land;
A product of free, wholesome living,
She's as sweet as the wild mountain rose
That is fed by the springs of the highlands,
From a source that only God knows.

Vera Earhart, N. Platte, Nebr.

OUR AIR MAIL

"Our Air Mail" has for years been running between readers of Ranch Romances and has enabled many people to make worth-while friends. You may write DIRECTLY to anyone whose letter is printed in this department. Remember that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances and contain nothing objectionable. The addresses given are complete. If no country is mentioned, it is the U. S. A.

This department is intended only for those who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing jokes and particularly request you do not sign your letters with other people's names. Address letters for publication to "Our Air Mail," 515 Madison Ave., New York.

Nevada Slim

Dear Editor:

I read your Ranch Romances all the time and find it to be a mighty fine book, one that really tells some true stories of the Old West. I'm a boy that was raised on a cattle ranch, and I love it with all my heart. At present I have a small ranch here in Bakersfield, but my main work is singing over the radio. I have three fifteen minute programs daily over KERN, and have been at this sort of work for almost eight years. If any of the folks that belong to your club would feel like writing a letter here to me, I'll send them pictures.

NEVADA SLIM.

Station KERN
Bakersfield, Calif.

Uncle Sam's Marine

Dear Editor:

I would like letters from girls of fifteen to nineteen, and you can all bet your boots that you will receive an answer. I come from Pennsylvania and am eighteen.

PVT. JOSEPH J. WHEELER, JR.
G 2-7, F-M-D, F-M-F,
Parris Island, S. C.

Lives on Texas Ranch

Dear Editor:

Won't somebody please drop a line to a lonely Texas girl? I am fifteen, live on a ranch in West Texas, about fifteen miles from the nearest town, and enjoy riding, dancing and swimming. I have my own horse and saddle and would like to hear from everybody, especially boys in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps.

ARLENE COLLET.

Gen. Del.,
Garner, Texas

Calling All Interested in the Service

Dear Editor:

I think your Air Mail corner is nice for a soldier who has a lot of time to write and I'd like to have my letter appear there. I like to write and will be glad to hear from people, especially men in the Service and girls who are interested in men in service. I came down in October, and expect to come home this October, and am interested in all sports, particularly boxing.

CPL. CLAYTON SCHOON.
Anti-Tank Co., 126 Inf.,
Camp Livingston, La.

Brown-Eyed Blonde

Dear Editor:
I am a dark blonde of seventeen, with dark brown eyes, am four feet ten, weigh one hundred pounds, and love to ski, sail, travel, and especially to write. Would answer promptly the letters of all interested enough to enclose a personal snapshot.

NOELLA BOUTIN.

324 Champlain St.,
Berlin, N. H.

American in Philippines

Dear Editor:
I am an American soldier stationed here in the Philippine Islands, and find it very lonesome over here. I'd like to hear from boys and girls from everywhere. I can tell some interesting things about these islands, so come on, girls, drop a fellow a line. I'm twenty-one and will exchange snaps.

J. D. BELFLOWER.

60th Coast Artillery, Battery E, U.S.A.,
Philippine Islands.

Eager to Have Mail Box Filled

Dear Editor:
I've tried before to have my letter printed in Our Air Mail, but it didn't appear. I hope I have better luck this time. Aged twenty-six, with blue eyes and brown hair, I'm very lonely, and want to have the mail box filled with letters from all over.

ARDELLA ELSON.

700 Fourteenth Ave.,
Beaver Falls, Penna.

Interested in Ranchers

Dear Editor:
A lonely Canadian girl, I'm especially interested in having cowboys and cowgirls for pen pals. I am twenty-four and will be more than glad to exchange snapshots. I have read Ranch Romances for over nine years.

MARGERY MATTHEWS.

64 Pond St.,
Simcoe, Ont., Canada

Far From Home

Dear Editor:
I'd like to hear from pen pals, since I'm a long way from home. My home state is Pennsylvania, and I'm in the Navy on duty on the West Coast. I'm twenty, and will try to make my letters as interesting as possible.

RICHARD SCHULTZ.

U.S.S. Lexington, 7th Div.,
c/o Postmaster, Long Beach, Calif.

Sports Enthusiast

Dear Editor:
I'm a school boy seventeen years old, and would like very much to correspond with your readers. I like most all sports, my favorites being swimming, baseball and boxing. Would like to hear from boxers and everyone who likes to write and receive letters.

BOB HOOK.

1600 Dean Avenue,
Des Moines, Iowa

Seriously Handicapped

Dear Editor:
Please print my plea for pen pals. Being unable to get around like other young people because I am a spastic, I have many lonely hours. So come on, all you guys and gals and fill up my mail box. There will be long, prompt replies. I am twenty-two and my hobbies are collecting picture postcards, songs and writing letters.

MARJORIE DeVALL.

540 Bennett Ave.,
Marshfield, Ore.

Blue-Eyed Sailor Boy

Dear Editor:
Am interested in Our Air Mail and would like to have pals from all over the U. S. A., especially brown-eyed girls. I am eighteen and a blue-eyed sailor boy. My favorite sport is basketball and collecting pictures which I'd like to exchange.

PAUL FLATJORD.

U.S.S. Nevada, 1st Div.,
Fleet P.O., Honolulu, T. H.

Mexican Señorita

Dear Editor:
A Mexican girl of twenty-five, I love to hear good music, read and write. I've lived in the U. S. A. all my life and hope to locate a few pen pals in this and any foreign country.

JOSEPHINE GARCIA.

1813 Kane St.,
Houston, Texas

Uncle Sam's Fireman

Dear Editor:
I'm just a lonely fireman in the Army, twenty-two, not bad to look at, and whose hobbies are reading and writing. I like all sports and I surely enjoy reading the Double R. Would like to hear from girls of any age, particularly those from eighteen to twenty-five. To the first five who write to me, I'll send souvenirs of Mexico.

P.F.C. CLARENCE FROMAN.

Station Complement,
Ft. Rosecrans, Calif.

Widely Traveled

Dear Editor:
My favorite pastimes are reading the Double R and writing letters, but since I can't get Ranch Romances here any more, which I regret very much, I'll have to write more letters. Won't you boys and girls please write to me? I am seventeen, have traveled a lot, and promise to make my letters as interesting as possible.

MILDRED HAMILTON.

Humboldt,
Sask., Canada

Left-Handed Hill-Billy

Dear Editor:
How's chances of a left-handed hill-billy crashing into Our Air Mail? I am the only girl my age (fifteen) within seven miles. I've many interests, including swimming, hiking, dancing and riding horses. I'd like especially to hear from CCC boys, and those in the fire and forestry services.

WANDA PETTIT.

French Corral,
Nevada County, Calif.

Interested in Younger Readers

Dear Editor:
I am a girl of fourteen who would like to have boys and girls from fourteen to seventeen write to me. I will exchange snapshots with everyone.

IRENE STANEK.

Box 122,
Harrison, Nebr.

Knows the Pacific

Dear Editor:

Another soldier in the Philippines, I'd like very much to have some pen pals, girls preferred. I have quite a collection of pictures of the Islands, and can tell you some interesting things about this place, Panama and Hawaii. I'm twenty-two, so come on and write.

PVT. RICHARD A. WOODRUFF.

60th C.A., (A.A.), Battery C,
Ft. Mills, P. I.

Collects Cups and Saucers

Dear Editor:

A girl of seventeen, I have traveled some in the United States and have many hobbies. My favorites are collecting knickknacks, cups and saucers and snapshots. I also like outdoor sports, dancing and roller skating. Boys and girls from seventeen to twenty-two are welcome, and also I'd like to hear from fellows in the Service.

MARIE SPRENGER.

15 Adam St., Apt. 25,
Tonawanda, N. Y.

Medical Department Pill-Roller

Dear Editor:

I'm a pill-roller in Uncle Sam's Army Medical Department, and at present am pulling night duty, from 7:00 p. m. to 7:00 a. m. I am eager to hear from any or all boys and girls from eighteen to twenty-one. I'd particularly like a letter from a gal in the deep ol' South. It gets kind of lonely occasionally, after working every night and sleeping in the day. How about someone dropping a letter in the mail for me? This soldier boy would sure appreciate it.

PVT. LLOYD SMITH.

Det. Med. Dept., U. S. A.,
Letterman General Hospital,
San Francisco, Calif.

In England for the Duration

Dear Editor:

I am a sixteen year old Canadian girl detained in England until the war is over. If any of my countrymen will write to me, I'll be very grateful and try to make my answers as interesting as possible. I've been here for three years and know quite a bit about this part of the country. My home province in Canada is Quebec and letters from there will be most welcome.

EDITH WHITEHEAD.

2 Queens Court, Queens Road,
Kingston on Thames,
Surrey, England

Long in Show Business

Dear Editor:

Can you find room for an honest-to-goodness lonesome man? I'm forty-five, and all my life have been in show business as advance man and manager of shows. I worked in Hollywood in the pictures for five wonderful years.

CHARLIE O'BRIEN.

550 West 20th St.,
New York City

Patience Rewarded

Dear Editor:

This is my fourth attempt to crash the gates of Our Air Mail. Here's hoping I succeed this time! I'm twenty-one, live in a lonely town, and would like to hear from boys or girls from twenty to thirty who are interested in photography.

BEATRICE WICKIE.

137 West Oak St.,
Elsie, Mich.

Loyal Reader

Dear Editor:

We have been reading Ranch Romances for a great many years and it's still our favorite and most interesting magazine. Now I'm wondering if there is room in your Air Mail department for another old-timer who would like very much to find a few pen pals, or is a widow just past forty-one too old? I have a great many hobbies and would enjoy hearing from anyone near my own age. If you publish this, perhaps I won't have to keep dusting cobwebs out of the mailbox.

PEGGY W. SPICE.

1402 Belvidere St.,
Waukegan, Ill.

Army Air Corps Men

Dear Editor:

We are two Army boys in the Air Corps, stationed at Kelly Field, Texas, and both twenty years old. Roy is blond, John brunette, and we especially want to hear from girls from eighteen to twenty-three.

ROY KNAPPE,
JOHN JOHNSON.

A.C.R.D., Co. D,
Kelly Field,
San Antonio, Texas

Many Interests

Dear Editor:

Will you print my plea? I am twenty-nine, single and interested in most any subject, but especially music, tennis, camping, scientific subjects, foreign languages and weight-lifting. I'll send the first ten who write me a snap of our nation's Capitol.

NELSON BOND.

5017 Quarles St., N.E.,
Washington, D. C.

From Oklahoma

Dear Editor:

I'm fourteen, with blond hair, brown eyes and a dark complexion. I'd like to correspond with boys and girls aged fourteen to sixteen.

MARJORIE McGUIRE.

c/o V. H. McGuire, Box 152,
Snomac, Okla.

Varied Career

Dear Editor:

A lonely fellow, I'm now working on a farm in Pennsylvania, but I have been all over the U. S., lived in Montana for years, and spent six years in the regular Army, which took me to Hawaii, Panama, the Philippines, China, Japan and Cuba. I can tell some interesting stories about these places. So come on, folks of all ages, you sure are welcome.

WALTER NIEMAN.

c/o Edward Goodman,
Rte. 1, Girard, Penna.

In a Strange City

Dear Editor:

I am a young man of thirty. As I've no living relatives, am located in a strange city, make my home at a hotel and my living working at night in a bakery, I am very lonely. My name has been on only two or three letters in the last fourteen months, so I would love letters from all over the world, especially from girls. Your letters will be mighty welcome, and I might even go visiting some of my pals if I get any from this region.

L. H. BOURNE.

Room 2, Plaza Hotel,
Oskaloosa, Ia.

Five Years With the Navy

Dear Editor:

Our Air Mail interests me very much, as I wish to strike up a correspondence with some of the girls in your club. I'm twenty-four, have been in the Navy five years, and have been rather successful in being rated a first class petty officer. I've been to quite a few places and can write about many interesting things. I can dance, swim and play tennis, am a lover of music and a collector of stamps. I am blond, with sort of curly hair, and am five feet eight tall.

PETE IVANS, W. J. 1/C.

U.S.S. Rowan (405)
c/o Postmaster, New York, N. Y.

One of Uncle Sam's New Minutemen

Dear Editor:

Here comes one of Uncle Sam's new minutemen, heading for the Double R ranch house. I am twenty-three and love all outdoor sports, especially football, which I played two years in college.

OAKLEY I. CECIL.

209th M.P. Co., 9th Corps,
Ft. Lewis, Wash.

Calling a Special Group of States

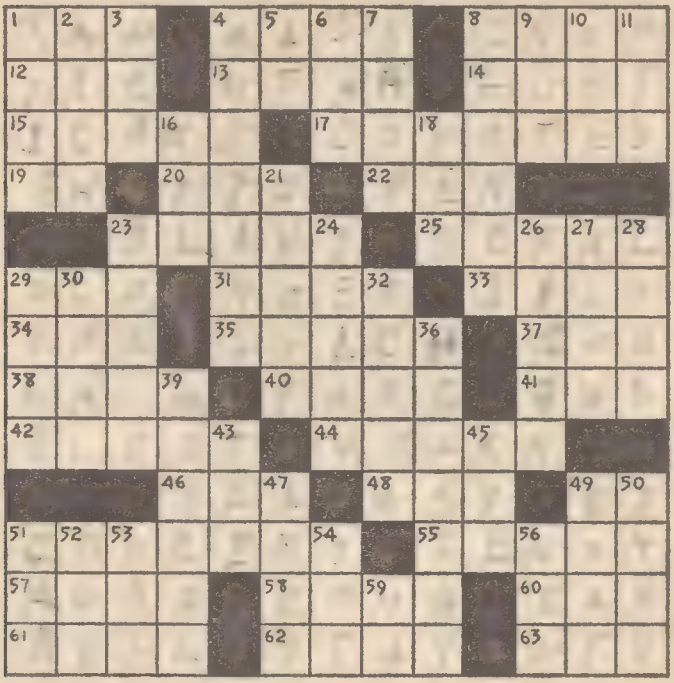
Dear Editor:

I'd like to have a pen pal in the following states: Wyoming, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, or Mississippi. I am forty-eight and would like pals my age, either men or women.

DAISY McMICHAEL.

Route 2,
West Chester, Penna.

The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle



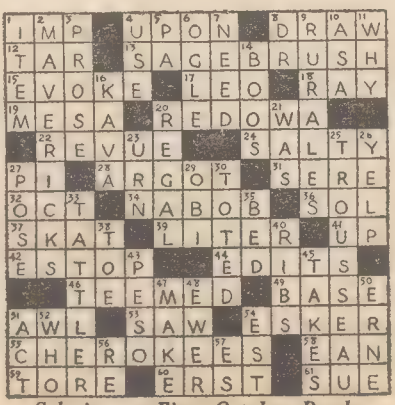
Across

1. To strike lightly
4. A quantity of matter
8. A riding whip
12. Anger
13. A Western state
14. To search for
15. Scrutinizes
17. Prairie wolves
19. An expression of inquiry
20. It is (Contr.)
22. Through, by, or for
23. Smooth; gentle
25. A part of a flower
29. Past; gone
31. Negative votes
33. A fodder pit
34. Not high
35. A ravine
37. To incline the head
38. To cripple
40. A weed
41. To be in debt
42. Frozen rain
44. To long for
46. The ocean
48. Crooked
49. To exist
51. Food dealers
55. A title of respect (Mex.)
57. An invisible emanation
58. Insensibility

The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue.

DEFINITIONS

60. The organ of hearing
61. A small windlass
62. To remain
63. Weights (Abbr.)



Solution to First October Puzzle

Down

1. To ascend
2. Chief; eminent
3. A garden plant
4. A Western horse
5. A preposition
6. A pouch
7. A store
8. Odd jobs
9. A deep track
10. A unit
11. Pints (Abbr.)
16. Nothing
18. An affirmative
21. A pig's nose
23. A kind of knife
24. To retard
26. A kind of nut
27. Below (Naut.)
28. An ore deposit
29. A gift of charity
30. An objective
32. To turn; twist
36. Rumor
39. An intoxicating liquor
43. A golf mound
45. A cereal grain
47. Parts of a circle
49. A ship
50. Makes a mistake
51. A snake-like fish
52. To regret
53. Mineral rock
54. A drunkard
56. Not old
59. Mother

Trail's End Roll Call

From all points of the compass, the members flock to the fold of the Trail's End Club. Welcome, newcomers!

Mrs. Dorothy Ashley, 1521 Pieper Drive, Toledo, Ohio
Mr. Daniel Ballew, U. S. S. Mississippi, 5th Div., Pearl Harbor, T. H.
Miss Susan Behrens, Rte. 3, Harrisburg, Penna.
Pvt. Charles Bell, Co. K, 186th Inf., U. S. A., Tacoma, Wash.
Miss Virginia Blair, Granger, Wash.
P. F. C. Edward Bowman, H. Q. 1st Bn., 8th F. A., U. S. A., Schofield Barracks, T. H.
Mr. Elihu Burris, Rte. 4, Rockhill, S. C.
Mr. Harry Cameron, P. O. Box 905, Carlsbad, N. M.
Mr. Alfred Carstens, 412½ W. Third St., Davenport, Ia.
Miss Stella Cook, Davidson, Tenn.
Mr. Thomas Doss, CCC Co. 596, Camp Wickiup, Lapine, Ore.
Mr. Edward Easter, Rte. 1, Blissfield, Ohio.
Miss Ardella Elson, 700 Fourteenth Ave., Beaver Falls, Penna.
Mr. Thomas Emanuelson, 308 Tuscarwas St. W., Canton, Ohio
Miss Willamina Gaude, 311 Railroad Ave., Donaldsonville, La.
Mr. Ray Goldsmith, Box 105, Valdez, Alaska
Miss Marie Grayson, Vessie, Mo.
Mr. Robert Grimm, 106 Broadway St., Defiance, Ohio
Mrs. John Hamilton, c/o Burt Smith, Carlton, Ore.
Miss Violet Hamilton, Newport, Me.
Mr. Lewis J. Hardin, 946 Roberts St., Nanty Glo, Penna.
Mr. Howard Haskins, 205 High St., Springfield, Mass.
Mr. Francis Kanich, 912 Lancaster Ave., Wilmington, Dela.
Mrs. Idella Keddy, Centerlea, Annapolis Co., N. S., Canada
Mrs. Ellen Lower, Rte. 1, Elkins, W. Va.
Mr. Jesse C. Milam, Station B, Box 75, Charleston, W. Va.
Mr. Richard Owen, Rte. 4, Union City, Penna.
Miss Josie Mae Perkins, Bethel Springs, Tenn.
Mr. Frank Romonowski, Station Hospital, Camp Wallace, Texas
Miss Thelma Rooker, Blue Mountain, Miss.
Mr. Bobby Shaw, 343 Linden Ave., Waynesboro, Va.
Miss Evelyn Simpson, 927 Sixteenth St. S. E., Roanoke, Va.
Mr. Harry Snyder, Rte. 1, Helper, Utah
Miss Merle Stewart, Wellington, Utah
Miss Norma Tidwell, Wellington, Utah
Cpl. Stanley Walker, Co. I, 17th Inf., U. S. A., Fort Ord, Calif.
Mr. William Wild, c/o W. G. S., Itchingfield, Horsham, Sussex, England
Miss Corinne Wilson, Montgomery Creek, Shasta Co., Calif.
Miss Olga Woynar, 717 Washington St., c/o Loupurex P. O., Heidelberg, Penna.
Mr. Norman Wyatt, Rte. 1, Ellerson, Va.

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I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.

I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(Miss)
(Mrs.)
(Mr.)

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City .....

State .....

This coupon makes you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.

Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.

Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

Please *print* your name and address plainly.

10-10-41

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

Man of Libra
Sept. 24—Oct. 23

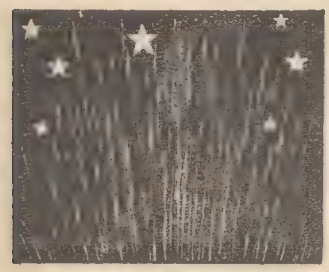
Born Under Your Sign: Gene Autry, George Raft, Rutherford Hayes, John Marshall, Frances Willard, Virginia Bruce

Your Attributes

Libra, which means the Balance or the Scales, governs those men who have perceptiveness, calmness, true poise. You are cautious, do not rush headlong into things. Yet, contrarily, you are often impulsively generous. You enjoy using your brain, and excel in pursuits that require keen mentality and adroit thinking. Your pleasant manner and comradeliness draw people to you. Almost instinctively you understand others and your sympathies are large. You could make a success of a public life, and either politics or the theater would be good outlets for your energy. You can be trusted; your word is your bond; and you would never betray a confidence.

★

What You Should Beware of



Don't mind criticism so much—it just might help you, even if it's harsh. Don't let trifles annoy you either, nor let them get in the way of the big thing you are trying to accomplish. You do not like to be deprived of your personal comfort and ease, yet you are sometimes forgetful of how others will feel under your sharp and usually witty criticism.

★

Your True Mate

Confirmed bachelors are sometimes born under your sign. You are seldom in any great rush to marry, but when you do, it's forever. The home-type of girl is yours, but she should have a well rounded personality, an appreciation of the myriad interests that will be yours all your life. Your ardent, virile disposition require the sort of mate who responds to your whims as well as your moods, your desires as well as your needs.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name_____ Sex_____

Address_____

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Exact date of birth: Year_____ Month_____ Day_____ 10-10-41

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. . . Are brewed by Balkan Witches from the ground bones of a bat—and sold to Ardent Lovers! Then, armed with this romance making concoction, the lover straightway slips it in his girl friend's coffee—to drive her wild with love of him!

Many and curious are the ways of lovers in other lands. But even stranger, a thousand times more fantastic, is the romance of worlds outside our own—of love in lands beyond the tomb!

WEIRD TALES, the unique magazine of the uncanny and the strange, brings you this kind of romance; romance that will give you a real thrill—a real and genuine reading change.

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Yes, you'll shiver to shudderful midnight yarns . . . be delighted—and electrified!—by generous, golden love stories.

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Here, truly, is a magazine where you may forget utterly the dull world around you—where you may lose yourself completely . . . yet find a thousand thrills —a thousand enchantments.

Weird Tales

THE MAGAZINE OF MYSTERY AND ROMANCE

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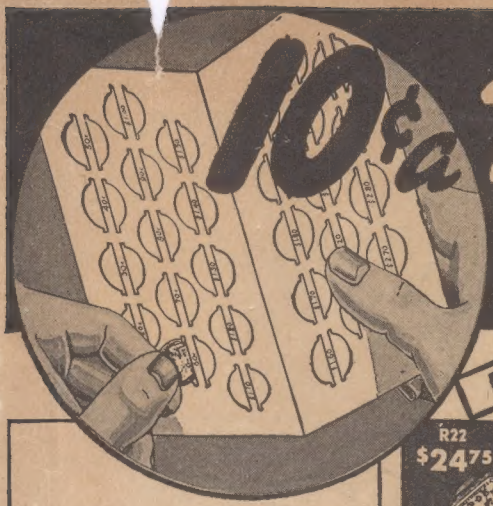

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WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch you want on coupon, giving number and price.

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If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch for ten days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

A Savings Book will be sent to you to help you save your dime each day. YOU PAY MONTHLY by money order or check. Try this easy, convenient method that has helped thousands to own fine watches without burden on the pocket book or savings.

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M17 $24.75

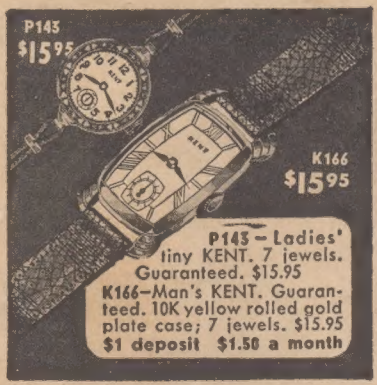
R22 – Ladies' BULOVA; 17 J. 10K yel. gold plate. $24.75
M17–Man's BULOVA; 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate case; bracelet. $24.75
$1 deposit $2.38 a month

L140 $37.50

S141 $37.50

L140 – Ladies' ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel. gold filled case. $37.50
S141 – Man's ELGIN–sturdy 10K yellow gold filled case; 17 jewels. $37.50
$1 deposit $3.65 a month

P143 $15.95



K166 $15.95

P143 – Ladies' tiny KENT. 7 jewels. Guaranteed. $15.95
K166–Man's KENT. Guaranteed. 10K yellow rolled gold plate case; 7 jewels. $15.95
$1 deposit $1.58 a month

$29.75 T67

O68 $29.75

T67 – Ladies' GRUEN. 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate. $29.75
O68 – Man's GRUEN Verithin: 15 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate. $29.75
$1 deposit $2.88 a month

K273 $19.75

K273 – Service Watch – new radium dial, easy-to-see. 7 Jewels, sturdy 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Made especially for Army and Navy men.
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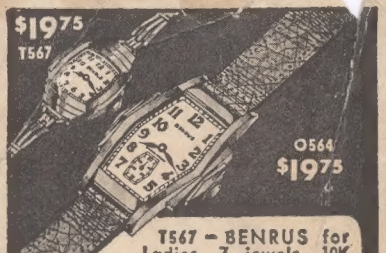
$19.75 T567



O564 $19.75

T567 – BENRUS for Ladies. 7 jewels, 10K gold plate; bracelet. $19.75
O564–Man's BENRUS: 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled plate; leather strap.
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